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THE LOCUSTS

THE LOCUSTS

by

OTTO SCHRAG

Translated from the German by

RICHARD WINSTON

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TO THE LOVING MEMORY
OF MY MOTHER

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
<i>Part One.</i> BEFORE THE STORY STARTS	7
<i>Part Two.</i> THE STORY	55
1. THEY COME TO LIFE	55
2. THEY WANDER EAST	130
3. THEY SETTLE	199
4. THEY DIE	403
5. BUT MEN LIVE FOREVER!	473

PART ONE

BEFORE THE STORY STARTS

I

HEINRICH BIEBER STOOD STILL. With a coarse linen cloth he wiped the sweat from his broad, ruddy face. Slowly he bent down. From the ploughed earth he picked up a small clod and crushed it between his calloused fingers. The soil trickled down to the ground like sand, like the dry sand of the steppes. There was no trace of moisture, of fertility, in all this land. Patiently, for days on end, he and his oxen had ploughed this soil. Patiently they had opened furrows. At home were sacks of wheat seed, ready for the sowing. But in this drought his seed would lie ungerminated in the ground; the crows would fatten on it or the wind scatter it over the plains.

For months no rain had fallen. Now and then black clouds had appeared, but the wind, sweeping incessantly down from the tops of the mountains, had tattered them or driven them on.

Heinrich Bieber gripped the plough. It was almost too light for this hard-packed soil; the furrows would not run deep and straight. The stand would look ill—if it grew at all.

With his heavy hands he strove to guide the heavy iron in a straight line. His steps were as slow and measured as those of his oxen; his head was bent forward slightly; his whole body was compact and massive as a wooden statue.

"Oha," he called to the oxen. The beasts stopped. Here was the end of his field. Rather, the end of the field he would cultivate this year. He might pace for hours or days behind his team without trespassing on another man's cultivated land.

Here he was master of all he surveyed. Master? Of what? Of this sandy soil? This steppe grass? Of the ants and their larvæ that his plough turned up?

Two years ago he had bought this land from the railroad, after he and others like him had unwillingly left their native land.

This land had not fulfilled its promise. His savings were ebbing away. The land he now owned was as big as the German duchy from which he had come; yet another year's failure would ruin him.

He had turned the plough, and now he strode toward the sun. He drew the big, round straw hat that resembled an old pot far down over

his eyes. His bare arms glistened with sweat, but his breath was as regular and slow as though he were strolling in the streets of the capital of the duchy back home.

To Heinrich Bieber the image of a town was still Lich in Upper Hesse. Going to Market in Atchison had not yet become habitual and familiar to him.

He had come to Kansas believing that for a farmer land was land everywhere. It nourished you, clad you and fed your beasts, and never let you down as long as you worked it hard. But this was not so.

First he had missed the walls and fences that enclosed all the land at home. He had missed the trees in the gardens, the quiet air and soft breezes, the little brooks and the children in the village streets. He had even missed the ducal police with their tall helmets.

Here in Kansas the wind blew unceasingly. Here you could gaze into the distance and find no boundary, no resting place for the eyes. Here no man cared for his neighbour, and neighbours were rare and far away.

"Oha," he called to the oxen again, and turned the plough once more.

When the sun was nearing the rim of the hills and the sky had become a shimmering greenish-blue, he sat down across the shafts. He was very tired—not so much from his labours as from his thoughts. It was good to feel the warm bodies of the animals. Heinrich Bieber rocked with their motion back and forth until he fell asleep. *

The oxen knew the way. There was no road, but still there were tracks and trails cutting across the land from east to west. Their lowered heads swayed under the yoke in the rhythm of their steps; stoical and calm, they carried the sleeping man to the hut that was now his home. Behind the man and the beasts the plough rattled and clanked over the hard earth.

Clara Bieber started out of her dreams at the sound of the animals' steps and the clanking of the plough before the house.

She opened the crude, broad-planked door and went out. Her husband had awakened when the oxen came to a standstill.

"Good evening, Heinrich," the woman said.

She saw the man and the team as black silhouettes against the twilight sky.

"Evening, Clara." The man's voice was heavy and slow, as though he carefully considered his every word.

He did not look up at his wife. There were still chores to be done.

He unhitched the oxen. Shuffling, he followed them behind the house, where he had built a crude stall. Here the animals were sheltered somewhat, and their fodder kept dry. Clara had already prepared their feed. The oxen deserved more, for they worked hard. But this must do for them until the next harvest. God grant there would be a next harvest.

The oxen drank water out of big tubs and then began to munch their feed. Heinrich cast a last look at their heavy bodies; they looked like strange monsters in the semi-darkness. Then he went into the house.

On the table the kerosene lamp burned. Clara was standing at the small iron stove, warming the soup she had cooked that morning.

Heinrich Bieber sat down on the bed, which was piled high with the checked down cushions they had brought from Germany. He wanted to take off his heavy shoes, but was too tired.

"A dog's life, this," he said.

"Be quiet. Michael is sleeping."

"He sleeps soundly."

They fell silent. The man stared into space and his wife worked at the stove.

When the meal was ready, Heinrich went to the table. Outside the wind began to howl, as it did every evening. The window rattled slightly. It had not been fitted firmly; nothing was sound and shipshape here. The house itself was only a hut, a provisional shelter hastily erected because a family needs a roof overhead, especially when a child is expected in a few weeks. But it remained a hut, though every few months they vowed to improve it at the first opportunity. The opportunity never came. There was always something more urgent to be done.

Heinrich laid his arm around the deep soup bowl, as though to embrace it, and began to eat. He did not look up. With even, regular movements he lifted and returned the spoon as though performing some necessary task, some dreary chore, with a minimum of effort.

When he had finished he leaned back in the chair.

"More?" the woman asked.

"What's that?"

"Do you want more to eat, Heinrich?"

"Yes."

He did not touch the refilled bowl.

"What's the matter?"

"We must get away from here," he said softly. "We must get away while we can. If the oxen starve to death, there's no hope for us."

"But we've paid so much money. And we own so much land."

"That's easy to say. By the end of this summer it will be so dry not a blade of grass will grow. There won't even be water for drinking."

"You don't really believe that yourself."

"I don't want to believe it."

"And I know it will change. I can feel rain coming. All around the house everything will be green. And trees will blossom and we'll have a garden and Michael will play in it . . ."

"That's enough." The man's voice was rough, but not harsh. "You wouldn't talk if you had felt the dry soil, as I have all day."

"One night of rain will change everything."

Heinrich gazed at the woman in front of him. She was eternally hopeful, eternally optimistic. Once he had been able to laugh at her sanguine prophecies, but now they infuriated him. Her gentle certainty irritated him. He knew better; always he had been right.

He gazed at her face. Tiny wrinkles surrounded her dark-brown eyes. Her rather prominent cheekbones had become more sharply outlined during the past few years. Her face had lost its girlish bloom, but it had gained the reflection of an inner strength. She was stronger than he, and he knew it. It did not help to pound his fist on the table and to shout that it was foolish just to have faith, when life inevitably mocked your faith. She would merely gaze at him, confident and unperturbed, and she would not answer.

The child in the corner of the room sighed in his sleep. The boards creaked in the little bed Heinrich had made, and then silence returned to the room; there remained only the everlasting hum of the wind and the noise of the rattling window.

That night fresh snow fell upon the peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Dark clouds with monstrous towers and pinnacles loomed over Long's Peak. Then the wind shattered them, and a few hours later the fragments hovered over the plateaus. It began to rain gently. The hard earth that had lain quiet, like a dead thing, breathed dubiously—as though it was expanding its lungs, loosening cramped muscles. Millions of tiny cracks and rents in the ground closed miraculously.

A herd of buffalo that had been drowsing between Willow Creek and Davenport Gulch became restive. Now and then one of the huge animals stood up and with its big red tongue began to lick drops of rain from the half-withered leaves of the bushes.

The hares sat in their holes and sniffed. The moist air penetrating into the soil had wakened them early.

The first few drops began to trickle into the underground tunnels of the field mice.

Now the rain fell faster. Beetles and ants crawled deeper into the earth to find shelter. The protective layer around the locust eggs became elastic and alive. Millions, even billions of these eggs lay side by side in the rather sandy soil of the plateaus, where their mothers had laid them the year before. Now came the gentle moisture they needed, and they awoke. They would live, these locusts; they would grow large and strong, with long, powerful legs and wings and sharp, dangerous jaws.

Heinrich Bieber was awakened about five in the morning by an unusual sound. He sat up in bed and listened hard. Could he be mistaken? The sound stopped. He held his breath. But then it began again,

and this time there was no mistaking it. It was as though a giant's hand were tossing pailfuls of water against the windowpane.

Heinrich Bieber got up. He groped in the dark for his boots and drew then on over his bare feet. Then he slipped into his trousers and coat and hurried to the door. When he opened it, the rain beat into his face. He turned up the collar of his coat and went out. He must see to the oxen. He felt his way along the wall of the house to the corner. Then he saw before him the two small pear trees that Clara had planted; they had been dying of drought.

He walked between them and came to the stall. As he had feared, the water was leaking through the roof. The oxen were standing pressed against the walls to the right and left, their heads lowered.

The man ran his hands over their broad backs. The hide of one was dripping: the other was comparatively dry. At home in Hesse, Heinrich would have shrugged, knowing that a little rain could not harm the beasts. But here, with this incessant wind and the draughty stall, he felt nervous about them. With an old blanket he began to rub the ox dry. As he worked, the rain beat steadily down on his head. The water ran down the collar of his nightshirt, but he did not notice. He finished drying the animal and covered it with the blanket. When daylight came, he would repair the roof.

When he returned to the house, the lamp was burning on the table. Clara had made a fire in the stove and set water to boil for soup. The baby was still sleeping peacefully, as he had slept when outside all was dry and withered and hopeless. His hands were clenched and his long, straggly hair made him look like a young puppy.

Heinrich stripped off all his clothes and began to rub himself dry.

"If only the stable was better . . ." he said.

"Didn't I tell you it would rain?"

"Yes, yes—and how it's raining."

"And now will we stay here and keep the land?"

"I wouldn't have quit, anyway."

"And some day we'll have a real house and a good barn and another team of oxen and a vegetable garden and a clock and a parlour, like at home."

"Yes, Clara—and when the harvest is in I want to go to Atchison with you. You know, the way we used to go to Lich."

Through the window came the faint light of the new dawn. Heinrich blew out the kerosene lamp. Kerosene was precious. Then he went out into the rain to repair the stable.

"Mo man," the baby called from his bed. And Clara understood: "Good morning, mamma."

"Good morning, Michael," she answered and went to him. He was sitting up now, and looked older than his thirteen months. She kissed

him and then placed a big pot of water on the stove. With swift, purposeful movements she began all the little tasks that made up her day's work. When she heard the thumping of Heinrich's hammer in the stable, a faint smile came to her lips. The worst was over. Now everything would turn out well.

By seven o'clock in the morning on the plateaus of the Rocky Mountains all the locust eggs, even those buried in the most sheltered spots, had received the water of life.

Above Willow Creek there is a rock that resembles a pyramid. The wind whips the rain against its many surfaces and the water runs in small rivulets over the granular basalt and down to the earth. It makes the stone glisten, and the faint light of a late dawn is reflected in it as in a diaphanous layer of ice.

There, where the little streamlets touch the ground, a group of locust females had descended on a sunny day in the previous autumn. With their abdomens they dug holes in the sand, and in these holes they deposited tiny packets of eggs, enclosed in a layer of a slimy substance.

Then they died and the wind picked them up and whirled them along behind a few withered autumn leaves. The dead bodies fell to earth again in a little valley.

The eggs lay in the ground throughout the winter, safe in their warm, protective cradle. Slowly they consumed the slimy substance that enveloped them. They grew a little. The membrane around them became taut and transparent.

But they were thirsty, terribly thirsty. After the snow melted there was no more water for them, and the more the sun warmed the sand in which they slept the thirstier they became.

Now, at last, the moisture came. At first it was only a faint trickle, no more than the morning dew on which they had fed until now. But then delicate silvery drops came spattering into the grains of sand, harder and harder; and this was all they needed for a new life.

With their whole surface they began to absorb the moisture and mysteriously to transform it into the fluids and solids that make an almost invisible locust body grow.

A few days later, when the sun came out once more and dried the basalt cliff above Willow Creek, the young locusts could already be discerned through the transparent skin of the eggs. They seemed to be smiling, well-fed and content.

JEREMIAH KENTRUP ALWAYS HAD a smile on his lips. It had become set into his face as the wrinkle over the nose becomes graven in the faces of other men. His hair was long and his great red beard grew

wild and unkempt. His eyes were a pale blue, and they were kind and good and sharp. And blind to evil.

With the hundred-odd other members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he had come to Bear Lake County almost a year before. There remained only sixty-three now, and perhaps none of them was destined to survive the hardships of life on this plateau six thousand feet above sea-level.

Jeremiah was on his way to his neighbour, whom he visited every morning. It had been raining for several days. Now the rain had turned to a cold sleet that soaked him to the skin, and he walked with head bowed into the wind. He had learned to walk diagonally to the wind, with his right shoulder forward, to present as small a surface of his body as possible.

Jeremiah had brought his people here, to this high, harsh plateau. The Latter-day Saints, he had felt, must take up the struggle for existence far away from the rest of men, must cultivate land that no one else wanted—land that God had created with the same love as the most fertile valleys.

But many had been stricken with illness, and some had died. At first only old people, then some of the younger ones. After a while a small group had moved on. Jeremiah had been unable to hold them. But it had been a severe blow. Every missing hand was an irreplaceable loss.

Now Jeremiah had reached the highest point on his path. He paused for a moment, drew a deep breath and gazed up at the sky. He knew that there would be no change in the weather until the sky broke and clouds appeared. But everywhere above him there was still the impenetrable grey mass that began along the rim of wet land, far out on the horizon, and rose endlessly into the sky.

He descended into the valley, stepping carefully to avoid slipping on the muddy ground. Then he turned to the right. Under a cliff that shielded it from the wind stood one of the covered wagons in which they had come.

Here Joshua Neill lived with his wives and children. They alone had not built a hut. He did not want to, he had no time, Joshua had said. Indeed, no one had time; the land took all their strength. Nevertheless, the others had all built simple wooden huts and no longer had to live in caves or their covered wagons. They had covered their windows with cloth because they had no glass, and they had strewn hay on the earthen floors. But a hut was a home, and a wagon was not.

Joshua was alone.

"Come in," he called. "It's dry and warm here, not damp and cold like the huts."

He was a tall, gaunt man with a beaked nose and fanatic eyes.

"You know I think you ought to build," Jeremiah replied. He climbed up into the wagon. "Where are the womenfolk?"

"I don't know. Didn't you meet them on your rounds? I think they're on a sick visit. I hear Nancy is dying. I wonder how many of us will be left next winter and the winter after."

"No man knows the length of his days."

"Especially not up here."

"You should not speak so, Joshua. We are like those who built the first bridges. Our work is not for ourselves, but for the many who will come after us."

Neill did not answer. He gazed out of the corner of his eye at Jeremiah Kentrup's everlasting smile.

"Do you really believe that?" he said finally.

"I know it."

Slowly Joshua stood up. He groaned as he moved; for weeks now his bones had ached when he stood erect. The effort forced him to cough, and his whole body shook convulsively. Then he went to a corner of the wagon and came back holding a clump of earth in his hand.

"Last night, when it began to rain, I did some digging in the garden. This is what I found."

Jeremiah took the earth in his hand. It was full of a whitish, sticky substance that he had never seen before.

"What is it?"

Joshua smiled mockingly.

"Locust eggs," he said.

Jeremiah stared at his hand. He understood at once. Was it for this that so many had died, for this that a young girl was dying even now?

He sat with bowed head. What of his dream of a great community where all could live the life they believed in, where they could cherish their faith?

"Maybe they're only in one place . . ."

"Wherever you step, Jeremiah, it's the same for miles around. Last night I went for a long walk, and wherever I dug the earth I found them. They laid their eggs here in this soil, perhaps long before we came. But now, in the last few days, the rain has awakened them."

"Now God has awakened them."

"Let us go away, Jeremiah, while we still have the courage."

"We will fight them."

"You're mad, or you know nothing of the locusts."

Jeremiah shook his head, and as the tall, gaunt man talked on, he continued to shake his head. This land was their land now. It was poor, dreary, stubborn soil. It was a land through which an incessant wind howled; it was seventy-five miles from the nearest market. But it was the land God had revealed to him; he could not abandon it without being unfaithful to God and to himself.

The women returned. The girl had died, they said. All were wet and

cold; they began to warm tea in one corner of the wagon. No one spoke. Jeremiah still held in his hand the infested clump of earth.

Finally, he took his leave. He went lower down into the valley. The rain had moderated. He was not sure what he wanted to do. Finally, he decided to visit Nancy's parents, as he had intended.

When he was out of sight of the covered wagon, he bent down. He began to dig the wet earth with his fingers. Then he squatted on his heels and examined the soil he had turned up. It was true; they were here, everywhere. They lay everywhere underfoot, millions and millions of them. As far as his eye could see the land was a monstrous breeding ground.

Nancy's parents received him calmly. The dead girl lay under a shroud, in a corner of the room. They did not speak of her. Nancy had died. That was as God willed. It had never been in their power to change; there was nothing they could do but accept.

The few words they spoke concerned the community.

"Before long we shall be able to sow," the old woman said, "and then the harvest isn't far. Things won't be so bad once we have our crops in."

"It must look beautiful when all these hills are covered with ripe fields," the man said—"beautiful . . ."

Jeremiah could not bring himself to speak of the locust eggs. Not now.

Outside, climbing the hill, he had the wind at his back. He was tired and felt grateful for its aid.

When he reached the top, the mist had parted. The whole broad expanse of his settlement lay before him. Here and there, like black dots, stood the shabby little huts.

Smoke rose from some of them. The people were cooking their noon-day meal or warming their chilled bodies. The low bellow of an ox sounded up to him. Then the scene vanished in fresh swaths of mist.

Jeremiah clenched his fists and opened his mouth, as though to shout. But no sound came forth; his lips closed with a snap and the smile returned to them.

And so he walked on.

Warm earth is a soft bed. It cradles the yellow grains of wheat until one day they puff out and stretch voluptuously, and finally burst. From their bodies comes new life: a white germ that longs for the sun and air and grows upward toward them and frail hair-roots that cling tenaciously to the soil.

The warm earth embraces with maternal affection the great roots of ancient oaks, she gives freely of her stores to the hungry roots until even the young shoots in the loftiest branches are satiate. She shelters and feeds the earthworms, and generously provides a home for newborn beetles and snakes.

And with the same love she cares for the eggs of the locusts. She guards them against the excesses of heat, and when above ground it is very cold and an icy wind whips through the fields, she gives her own warmth to the sleeping small creatures.

But the days of privation were long past. The snow and the frost and the terrible drought were over. The first miraculous rain had given the children of the locusts such strength that the earth had nothing more to do. The locusts grew of themselves. All that they would ever need on earth was already present in the germ. Their long legs were drawn up against their bodies and their other members were neatly folded into the smallest possible space.

Sometimes a faint quiver ran through their bodies—especially at midday when the rays of the sun penetrated almost to where they lay.

3.

JOHNNY BROWN TRIED TO LIGHT a fire. It was difficult; although the rain had stopped, everything was still wet. Dampness had penetrated everywhere, and even the tinder would not burn.

"Damn stuff," Brown growled to Jacques Dufour, who stood above him in the darkness, watching his efforts.

"Let me try."

Brown straightened. His face was obscured by the darkness, but his body was that of a giant.*

"Patience will do it," Dufour said, with a pronounced French accent. He wrestled with the tinder, muttering "*merde*" several times. But finally a small fire burned.

Johnny Brown squatted on his heels. He began to coax the little fire. Cautiously he fed it with tiny chips of wood. He enclosed it in his great hands to guard it against sudden gusts of wind; he nursed it with a gentleness that seemed to go ill with his giant's frame.

Of the faces of the two men, little more than their eyes was visible. All the rest was hidden behind a growth of beard several weeks old.

The flame had outgrown the tenderness of adolescence. It crackled lustily now between the two stones that served as hearth, and licked eagerly around the big, dripping piece of meat that Dufour held over it.

The pleasant smell of cooking arose. The outleaping heat of the fire crawled slowly up the legs of the two men. They sat down upon a fallen oak and began to chew the half-cooked meat. Fat ran down the sides of their mouths and their hands became slippery. When they had finished, they licked it off their dirty fingers, and then they dried their palms on their trousers.

A few months before they had formed a partnership. Johnny Brown believed there must be gold in Lemhi County. He had no idea why he

thought so, but he had spoken convincingly to Dufour about it. At the time Dufour had been idle. Brown had proposed that they prospect for gold and split the proceeds fifty-fifty.

The little Frenchman had not hesitated. He would settle down somewhere and take up farming again, of course. But it would be so much easier to start with a few ounces of gold dust in his purse.

All his life, in all his various trades, Dufour had remained a farmer at heart. But whenever he had amassed money enough to buy a piece of land as large as a French *département*, a woman had crossed his path. There was no doubt that he would never return to farming when he had money. But now that he had none, he dreamed constantly of wheat fields and kitchen gardens and vineyards.

Johnny Brown had other plans. He was resigned now to the fact that he had been mistaken about Lemhi County. But there were so many other places on the continent, so many lands unprospected. He had seen few maps in his life, and he found them hard to read. But he knew all the geography he needed to know. He could envisage all the valleys and mountains and rivers as they were, not as brown, green and blue splashes of colour on a sheet of paper.

"Well, this is where we split up," he said.

"*Qu'est-ce que tu veux, mon vieux.* We made a mistake. Mistakes happen."

"Oh, that's not it. Gold in the river isn't gold in your purse. Still, it hasn't been bad."

"Oh, *non, non.* But every day counts now, or I won't reach the Mississippi Valley in time. The wheat ought to be planted soon, and I do not even have a farm yet."

"I'm not holding you back."

"I know, I know . . ."

"For my part, you could have pulled out a week ago."

"Ah, *non.* First we had to search the last bit of earth, did we not? Until to-night there was always a chance."

Johnny Brown did not answer. He felt uncomfortable about splitting up with Dufour now. But after all, he couldn't say that to the man. If he was going to be so stupid as to run off now, when the rain had stopped and it was easier to prospect, when the real hardships were over . . .

Both men stared into the gloom of the forest. Leaves rustled, twigs snapped, and now and then a great tree trunk groaned heavily.

"I still haven't told you how to make a *gigot de mouton*," Dufour said in a half-whisper.

The giant at his side did not answer.

"*C'est très simple, mon cher ami.* You must not use fresh meat. Let it lie for a few days . . ."

"Shut up!"

"What's the matter with you?"

A pale yellow moon rose from behind a hill. Both men watched the drama tautly. The wind freshened and it grew cooler. Brown threw more wood on the fire.

"*Eh bien*, as you choose," the Frenchman said, shrugging. "I'd promised to explain to you about the *gigot*. If you want to eat it half-burned or half-raw, *tant pis pour toi*. At home I would put a piece of butter in a big cast-iron frying pan and put the pan on a beautiful tile stove . . ."

"What's it like being a farmer?" Brown interrupted.

Dufour was at a loss for a moment. He dug his fingers into the heavy, moist forest soil and held a handful of it to the light of the fire.

"*C'est très simple*," he said. "You strew wheat grains in the earth and in the summer you reap, with a thousand per cent. profit."

"That's all?"

"Oh, no. Naturally you have hundreds of other things to do. For instance, you have oxen, marvellous animals with horns like that"—he spread his arms wide apart—"with iron muscles and a soft, silken skin. When the sun shines on them they look almost like gold. You have to take care of them. They're more important than your wife or children; without them all would starve. Maybe you have a horse too. Have you ever heard of Flemish horses? They are tall and broad and their bones are as strong as seasoned oak wood. And they have long blond hair, like the children in the north. You have a little house that stands in the middle of a garden, and in the windows are flowerpots with geraniums. You have a kitchen with copper pots and a huge stove. You have a wife and a few children. When you come home from work, you sit down with your family at the table and you eat with them from a big bowl until you're full and heavy and tired."

"Do you think someone like me could be a farmer?" Brown asked.

"*Mais naturellement*. Why not? You're big and strong and patient . . ."

"And you say you make a thousand per cent. profit?"

Again Dufour was at a loss.

"You mustn't misunderstand, Brown," he said finally. "You get at least ten grains for every one you put in the earth. Often much more than that. But profit—well, I'm not so sure. You always have something to eat, and every year you can put a little aside. You're never a poor man. But very few ever get really rich. I don't know quite why. There are crop failures and insects and sicknesses . . ."

Brown stood up. He stretched, throwing his big arms wide apart. He yawned, and the sound was like the howl of a jackal. A young bear that had been lurking around the fire for half an hour started and with twitching nostrils peered from the bushes at the two men. A screech owl fluttered to a higher branch, blinked anxiously and hid his head under his wings. A Shoshone Indian whom the glow of the fire had lured from

is hunting leaned against the wet back of a giant oak and merge a single shadow with the trunk of the tree.

Brown began to wrap himself in his blanket. Slowly he settled to the ground.

"Where are you going to farm?" he asked.

"Maybe in the Mississippi Valley."

"For good?"

"*Mais oui, mon vieux.*"

A few minutes later Dufour heard the deep breathing of the sleeping man. He himself remained awake to watch the fire. He could stare for hours into the licking flames without stirring. He watched them as they grew and vanished, as they reached out insatiably for new fuel. And he remembered the great fireplace in a small house in Gironde where as a child he had built little castles out of thin, dry birch logs. The room was usually crowded with people, and after supper all had sat around the fire. That was when he had heard his first stories about America. In reality it was quite different from the tales of old Malicrot. Hadn't he been a fool to come over here? Wouldn't he have been happier planting apple trees in Arcachon than sitting here in Lemhi County, before a small fire, doing nothing but throwing an occasional branch to the flames and murmuring "*merde*"?

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear the faint cry of the screech owl, which had awakened again because it was hungry. He did not hear the bear stepping awkwardly over dry branches, nor did he hear the Shoshone Indian who now stood directly behind his bowed head.

Brown started up out of his sleep.

"What did you say?" he asked, as though continuing a conversation.

Dufour did not answer.

"Hey, what's the matter? Are you asleep?"

The Frenchman did not move.

"Dufour!" Brown bellowed.

There was no answer but the echo of his own voice. He sprang to his feet. For a moment he became tangled in the carefully wrapped blanket, then he reached the slumped figure. He bent down and took Dufour's head in his hands. "Hey," he said.

His touch unbalanced the Frenchman's body. Slowly he slid to the ground in front of the stone on which he had been sitting.

From his back, just between the shoulder blades, projected a bright-feathered arrow.

When day broke, Brown buried Dufour on the shore of the small river that lay some two hundred feet from their camp. As he dug in the sand to make the grave, he found nuggets of gold. He stared unbelievably.

Again and again he let the sand run through his hand. He heard the blood pounding in his ears; he felt a great expansion in his lungs. As quickly as he could, he closed the grave. The only thought in his mind was that he must begin, must find out how far these riches extended. Perhaps the whole shore was covered with gold. Perhaps one nugget lay on top of the other—a great new paradise unknown to anyone but himself. This would be his claim. He must fence it in. There was not a moment to lose. Someone else might come along.

Little Dufour was already no more than a vague shadow over his life. All that remained to him of the Frenchman was the word "*merde*." Brown had taken it into his speech, and now he uttered it expressively. He cursed because his hands were sticky with an odd gluey mass that lay everywhere in among the gold; there were millions of tiny clumps of it, far more than there were nuggets of gold.

He thought briefly of the Frenchman once more when it occurred to him that Jacques would probably have known what this was; Dufour had known everything about the soil and the creatures of the soil.

Later, when he heard from prospectors who had once been farmers that the tiny clumps in the sand were locust eggs, which could become a dreadful plague, the little Frenchman's dream of farming seemed altogether incomprehensible to him. Really quite incomprehensible.

In Lemhi County, near Horse Creek, there was a clearing in the woods. It was a small, grassy space on which the sun showered all its radiant warmth when the rest of the region was still cold and withered.

Out of the sandy soil of this clearing sprang crocuses while the ground elsewhere was still frozen. And here the first young locusts emerged from their eggs.

The membrane around them had grown thinner and thinner during the preceding weeks. Through the translucent covering the outlines of the young insects had become sharper. Their twitching movements grew more frequent.

Now, near the root of a blade of grama grass a tiny hole formed in an egg. Then, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, the pale, minute insect crawled through this hole into the loose earth. The fragrance of the early summer air, trickling down through the grains of sandy soil, showed it the way.

Three seconds later the same scene was enacted in the loose earth around the roots of the daisies, and a few seconds after that around the raspberry bushes.

Then a few grains of sand near the stalk of grama grass moved. A miniature horse's head appeared, a number of kicking legs and a longish body. A gust of wind passed over the creature and the sun marked out a delicate new shadow upon the earth.

MARTIN MILLER WAS BORED with the life in Topeka. Like all the others who had come with him, he felt it was time for him to go back to the land where he belonged.

Erect, looking neither to right nor to left, he sat at the long table, scoured white by hard rubbing. His face was sallow, his features tight. With unblinking eyes he looked down at the plate before him; he put the potatoes into his mouth with austere, measured movements. Austerity and moderation were innate with him.

It was remarkable how much alike all these Mennonites were. They were like the pebbles that have rolled down a stream from source to mouth; at the end of their thousand-year journey they are almost indistinguishable, the one from the other. All cracks and wrinkles have vanished, all individual character has been worn off. The soft outer layers have washed away and only the hard inner core remains.

Four hundred families of these Russian Mennonites had come to Topeka. The railroad company that had sold them their land had put them up in the Kingsbridge Shops. They were not very comfortable. And they had remained so long only because their representatives could not decide which land to choose of all that was offered them.

But they had all grown as restless as Martin Miller. This life in a strange city, without real work to do, disquieted them. When had Mennonites ever had leisure to sit around doing nothing?

Martin Miller recalled the stories of his grandparents: how the great Czarina, Catherine, had invited them to Russia in 1783. The lands they had chosen were not really Russian at all. They were Turkish or Tartar or Taurian. But at that time there had been no Kingsbridge Shops. They had lived in tents, or in huts hastily constructed, and the days were too short for the work that had to be done.

Miller laid his fork beside his plate. Most of the others were still eating. There was little talk; the only sound was the faint clatter of forks and spoons. Even this was low, controlled. The main thing in human life was self-control and just now this was beginning to slacken. This idleness was vile and weakening.

Miller was troubled about his own daughter. The girl had changed. He looked at her out of the corners of his eyes. She was not pretty, not at all. There were few pretty girls among the Mennonites. Like the objects with which they surrounded themselves, their bodies had grown into purposeful things. They had big bones, large hips and feet—feet that stood firmly on the ground. Their eye sockets were usually deep and narrow; this was a good protection against the sun and sandstorms. Their hair was dry and thick and wiry; they could go bareheaded in all sorts of weather.

Yet there was something different, something individual about Lydia, though where the difference lay was hard to say. She was not very unlike the others. But her voice was deep and had a lilting quality; her skin was transparent and clear, not freckled.

She must have noticed that her father was watching her, for a faint flush rose to her cheeks. She chided herself. It was silly to blush when one's conscience was clear.

But was her conscience clear? In itself there was nothing wrong with loving a man, when a girl was twenty. Indeed, her parents were simply waiting for her to make her choice—among the Mennonites, of course. . . .

Once upon a time anything else would never have occurred to her. In Russia they had lived like a state within a state, a close community among strange peoples. One did not think of marrying a Tartar. But here . . .

She had met Lopez Casseiro shortly after their arrival. He looked just like one of their own men, only he was handsomer. He had full lips, sparkling black eyes and thin, fine hands. He came from the West, and at first they had difficulty understanding each other. But Lopez had finally found an old woman who provided them with a yard surrounded by a high wall and who interpreted their conversations—without change of expression, as though she understood not a word of what was being said. Thereafter the three sat behind the wall, on a stone bench, almost every evening. For the last few evenings they had held hands, and the old woman had no longer sat between them. . . .

Chairs were pushed back in the large room with the great windows. The meal was over. A long afternoon lay before them, and most of them had nothing to do. They went outside, into the street.

The rain had stopped some days ago, and the sun was warm and gentle. Martin Miller followed his wife and Lydia outside. He had buttoned his jacket up to the collar, and almost without moving his lips he said, "I want a word with the two of you."

They walked away from the others. Lydia knew what her father would talk about. Strangely enough, she felt quite calm.

Surreptitiously, she glanced at her mother. Caroline Miller resembled her husband, but she was smaller and more delicately built. She carried herself as stiff and erect and ungracefully as he, and she always wore a grey linen dress that was buttoned to the neck.

When her husband spoke, she bent her head slightly and said in her even, toneless voice, "Yes, Martin."

Silently the man strode along for a while between his two women. The inhabitants of Topeka no longer stopped and stared when they saw the Russians. They were used to their guests by now. The shopkeepers of the town disliked them, because so many samovars and copper kettles still stood on their shelves. They had bought a great many such things,

expecting to sell them to the strangers. But the Mennonites had glanced at the shiny objects and said "No" in firm, moderated voices. Now and then they opened their purses and bought a knife or some similar practical tool—after carefully inspecting it.

When the houses of the town were some distance behind them, Miller stood still. With narrow, slightly squinting eyes he gazed out over the fields, already bright green with young grass. Then he slowly turned his head.

Lydia had watched his every motion. She suspected what he would say, for she knew her father as well as did her mother. Both women understood that he saw only black and white. His path was a broad, sunlit highway that ran straight, without deviation, through a flat landscape. Fragrant little flowers blooming timidly in the delicate half-shadows along the roadside were useless weeds to him. They must be torn up by the roots. Whatever could not flourish in the broad light of day must be destroyed.

"I want to know what's wrong with you," he said abruptly to his daughter.

"What do you mean, father?"

"Since I am not blind, I've noticed how changed you have been for some time past."

"I am changed?"

"You have a secret and I want to know it."

"I'm twenty years old, father. May I not have something that concerns me alone and no one else in the world?"

"If you mean by that a secret love affair—no. At least, not while you belong to us."

"What does that mean—belong to you?"

"You dare to ask?"

"Are we any better than other people? Must we shut ourselves away from them forever? Haven't we come to this land to build up something new together with them; something that will be for everybody, not only for the Mennonites?"

"I will not discuss such matters with my immature daughter. Who is the man behind all this?"

"I won't tell you."

"Of course he's not one of our men!"

"No. I hate everything that belongs to us."

"Then you hate your father and mother!"

"You know that isn't true."

Their words had followed rapidly, one upon the other. Neither had reflected his answers for a moment. Now both paused.

"You won't tell me the man's name, then," Miller said finally. "Very well. You must know why you conceal it from me. You must also know

that I shall protect myself, I will try to make you live the way I think right, and the way generations before me thought right. I don't want to know the name of your young gallant. But from now on you won't see him again."

Lydia's mother intervened timidly. Twenty years ago she had been like her daughter, and now, as she listened, the memory of the long-ago past returned to her. But she had never voiced her feelings. It was indecent to say such things. These were matters one settled with oneself, without troubling others. She had long since become reconciled. The tender emotions did not count; what mattered was that one followed the safest path, the tried and tested path that had been trodden out by the broad feet of one's forefathers.

"Perhaps Lydia will tell *me* who the man is," she said.

"Not you either, mother."

"Let her keep her secret," Miller said harshly. "We will become accustomed to our daughter's concealing something from us. We're strong enough to bear it. But I demand that she promise not to see him from now on."

"I promise nothing."

"I'll give you one minute to consider."

He drew a big watch from his pocket and stared tensely at the hands, his mouth tight shut and his lips invisible. The sun bathed them all in a yellow light. The only sound that broke the silence was the cheerful cry of a cuckoo in the distance.

"I don't need your minute, father," the girl said, after a brief pause. "I'll see him as often as I like. I've met him secretly up to now; from now on I'll show myself publicly with him."

Slowly Miller replaced the watch in his pocket. His control had suddenly broken.

"That means you are leaving us, Lydia?" he asked.

"Perhaps it means that you will not have me."

"For an affair like this you forget all we have meant to you?"

"I'll never forget, if you want me the way I am and if you'll let me have some life of my own. But I won't give up someone who means all my happiness to me and has given me a new, a wonderful life. I won't give him up for a stupid old law that was all right when we were among the Turks and Tartars, but has no meaning here."

"Go your way," the man said, with tight lips.

"Martin . . ."

"Go!"

"Martin, she is our child . . ."

Without replying, Miller turned on his heel and strode back, taking long, even steps. Caroline Miller hesitated for a moment. Then she hurried after her husband.

Slowly, absently, Lydia walked through the fields back to the city. Perhaps she had overestimated her own strength, she thought. Perhaps, too, Lopez Casseiro would laugh at her. How did she know he had ever considered marrying her? She had not asked him how he made his living. In all his stories he had casually evaded the subject, as though it were something slightly unpleasant, not to be talked about because there were so many other, more important matters. He had spoken to her about the sunsets in the West, and about flowers, trees and animals. He had showed her small wooden figures that the Indians had carved. And in the past few days they had mostly sat without talking at all. But she had felt his hand and looked into his eyes, and that had meant more than any talk.

When Lydia came to their rendezvous, Lopez had not yet arrived. The old woman was sitting on the bench, knitting stockings.

"You're early to-day, child," she said.

Lydia sat down silently. There was no sound but the low click of the knitting needles.

"I hear you all are leaving soon," the old woman said, looking at the girl.

"I don't know."

"It won't be easy for you out there. It will take all your strength and courage to make your way. It's a good thing there are so many of you and you keep together so well. One helps the other." She paused. "I've heard you are being sent into the locust country. They're sly dogs, these railroad men. The strongest are needed for such a struggle."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to interfere, but I saw with my own eyes, that I did. More than one came through here last year, after the Rocky hoppers came down on them. They had signs on their wagons: 'Eaten out by grasshoppers. Going back to live with wife's folks.'"

"But we had grasshoppers often in Russia and nobody was ruined by them."

"Then they were different."

"How different?"

"Here comes Lopez. Ask him."

The man and the girl stood close together when they greeted each other. Their heads almost touched as they talked. Their voices were low and they understood little until the old woman began to interpret. As she spoke, she went on knitting, and her voice remained a monotone, as though the words her lips formed had no meaning.

"Lydia has something important to tell you—she doesn't know how to begin."—"He asks if you trust him?"—"Yes, yes, but it's terribly difficult because she can't imagine what you will say about the bad thing that has happened to-day."—"You ought to know that he isn't a coward

and whatever it is he will stand by you."—"Her parents know everything and they've told her she has her choice, to leave either you or them. She has chosen you."

There was a pause. Then a rapid stream of words poured from the man's lips. The old woman replied, and there was a brief discussion between them.

"What is he saying?" Lydia asked anxiously.

"He says you've acted too hastily."

"Why?"

"He is a poor man. He can't support you. He lives by prospecting for gold and gambling and trading a little with the Indians. He's here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"Can't he get a little land, just a small patch? I can do any kind of work. We would rise, in time. We would save, and every year we would add a little more land."

Lydia looked at Lopez. He shook his head as he replied.

"He says the locusts would eat you out the first year. He has just come from the Great Plains. Never in his life had he seen so many locust eggs. Wherever you kick up a piece of earth you find them by the thousands."

Lydia did not answer. Slowly she withdrew her hand from the hand of the man. Where would she sleep to-night? she wondered drearily.

"He hopes you're not angry with him," the woman said.

Lydia shook her head. She was glad she had learned to command herself.

"She isn't angry, but she would like you to go now."—"He won't go until he's sure you are safe with your parents."—"You can't take her home; it is impossible."

Lopez Casseiro did not move. It was quite dark by now; only high in the sky was there a distant glow.

Lopez stood up. He took the girl's hand. She did not resist, and when he tugged she stood up like a child.

He was stronger than he seemed. He put his arm around Lydia's waist and stepped out into the street with her. The street was deserted. Scattered lights winked here and there in windows, and from the saloons came laughter and singing.

The two looked like a single figure. Lydia laid her head on the man's shoulder and closed her eyes. She walked mechanically, unaware of the motion. She seemed to be floating in the air. Her feet scarcely touched the ground and all around her were tiny clouds that felt like cotton wool. Now the earth was far below her. But the sky was still dark.

"Where is the sun, dear?" she asked.

Lopez did not understand. He felt her weight grow heavier from moment to moment. He thought she had fainted, but then he saw that

her legs were still moving. Nevertheless, he had the feeling that without his support she would crumple to the ground.

Lydia imagined she saw a silvery gleam before her. At last the night was ending. The distant gleam came closer. A low humming filled the air. Then the flickering light became intolerably painful to her eyes. But she could not look away, she could not turn her head. Now she was in the midst of the cloud. And now it had become millions of shadows that buzzed around her, became entangled in her hair, ran down her arms and legs and inside her blouse.

"No, no!" she screamed, and began to flail about her. "No, no, no, take the beasts away—they're killing me. Help, help, the locusts, the locusts!"

Lopez did not understand her outcries. But the Mennonite representatives, who were assembled in one of the rooms of the Kingsbridge Shop, understood. And Martin Miller recognized his daughter's voice.

With face bloodless and icy, he stood up. Not even now did he move hastily. He grasped a lamp and stepped to the door, followed by the other men.

Lydia had grown calm. She could no longer defend herself against the millions of tiny creatures that had fallen upon her. And so she resigned herself. Slowly she slid to the ground. Let them consume her if they would. "One must be resigned to the inevitable," her father had always told her.

"I am resigned," she whispered to him as he approached her.

He knelt beside her, the lamp in his hand. Then she was carried into the house.

"Is there anyone here who speaks English or Spanish?" Lopez asked.

"Here," a voice answered from the darkness.

"I want to explain what has happened."

The men conversed for a moment in whispers. Then the voice spoke out of the darkness:

"We want no explanations."

Like shadows, the men returned to the building. Lopez could see no more of them than the dark outlines of their heavy bodies and their pale faces that looked as though they had been carved from oak wood.

A few weeks later, when the Mennonites left Topeka in their high Russian wagons to take possession of their land, Lydia sat beside her father. She was pale and still rather weak. Miller held the reins firmly, and now and then, without turning his head, he studied his daughter. And when the strong wind of the plains, still smelling of the fresh earth, conjured a faint flush upon her cheeks, Martin Miller smiled.

And at this time the first tiny locust crawled out of its egg in a warm, sheltered spot in Bear Lake County also.

Wherever men settle, wherever farmers plough the earth and flowers bloom in gardens and grapes ripen in vineyards—there are locusts.

The peoples of the earth have known them since ancient days. In legend and history, Bibles and prayer-books, in songs and cooking recipes, crawls, hops and flutters the little green insect with the ugly horse's head.

How it came to be in the world, none can say. Did it acquire its present form through millenniums of unceasing struggle with other insects? Or did it spring spontaneously out of the decaying bodies of dead animals, as our forefathers believed? What matter? It is enough that this creature must be one of Nature's favourite children. Scarcely another living thing upon this earth is so well-equipped with the tools and weapons for survival. It must have some great function in the divine plan, for Nature has bestowed on it prodigious powers of reproduction.

There are countless varieties and subvarieties. In the foothills of the Atlas Mountains dwells a long green insect with short antennæ and tri-segmented limbs: the Moroccan migratory locust. In Eastern Turkestan a creature three inches long ravages the land of the peasants: the European migratory locust. Names do not matter. The settler in East Africa does not care that the source of his misfortune is the bright-coloured *Zonocerus elegans*; nor is the farmer in Kansas interested in the scientific name of the swarm that consumes his crops—the *Melanoplus spretus*.

The physiognomy is similar in all varieties. A horny head retracted into the neck, a low brow from which wave antennæ of various lengths. The eyes are like buckshot, and small light spots back of the head serve as organs of hearing. But all the rest of the face has been slighted for the sake of the huge implements for eating. Almost three-fourths of the face consists of scissorlike mandibles, with razor-sharp inner edges. The muscles of these mandibles are so powerful that the locust finds the bark of young trees a succulent morsel.

The body of the locust resembles the battering rams that were once used to smash the walls and gates of fortresses. In front it is armoured and invulnerable. The head is lowered like that of an angry bull, the muscular legs thrust like columns into the ground, and with every step the insect drives its whole long body inexorably forward.

The abdomen, however, is soft and vulnerable. It is not unlike the body of a maggot, and perhaps it is no more than a survival from a happier epoch geologic ages past, when the locusts still crept on their bellies like the worms, taking their fill from the abundance of lush vegetation and having no need to gnaw tough leaves, or to travel for miles on untiring legs, or to sweep for days across continents with wings spread wide and air sacs filled.

Along with the locust's physical development from the idyllic life of

its early days upon this earth to its present marauder's existence, there has taken place an astounding expansion of its intellectual powers. Only when it is young does the locust's mind reveal the mental lacks of its early progenitors. A young locust rushes rashly into fire or water, and often it is saved from extinction only by its extraordinary toughness. It can live in water for twelve hours if it has an opportunity to dry out in the sun afterward.

In five weeks it reaches mental maturity, and becomes sly and sagacious. It is a moot question whether it has learned from experience or has suddenly awakened from the illusions of an insouciant youth. Whatever the truth, it may no longer be deceived; not even its cunning arch-enemy, the farmer, can trap it.

Perhaps the farmer believes the tale he heard in childhood that the locusts will leap blindly into the water. To save some part of his crops, he diverts the course of his brook, turning it to divide his wheatfield.

But the small green creatures have long since left behind their youthful innocence. They have made a journey of hundreds of miles; they have experienced rain and sun, storms and lightning and thunder; they have survived swarms of birds and ichneumon flies. And to the amazement of the farmer, not a single locust throws itself into the water. They begin to crawl up the stalks on the water's edge. At first only a few of the wiser ones attempt this. But the others follow when they see that these have succeeded in swinging across the stream from stalk to stalk and from leaf to leaf, as over a living bridge. And at dawn the farmer finds the locusts in that part of the field he had hoped to save for himself and his family.

For many generations men have searched for the laws that govern the locust swarms. How is it, scholars have asked, that the harmless strict individualists who sit in our meadows making pleasant music with their stridulatory organs can suddenly become ravenous hordes? What happens to these tiny creatures whom our poets and minstrels have so cherished, to whom we have so often listened nostalgically while the dusk settled over the countryside? What transforms them overnight into a murderous, predatory community?

The scientists first noted that the general direction of their flight was unfaillingly the same. Generations of locusts might be born and die; the lone prairie might be transformed into great fields of wheat and corn; along small strips of sandy soil in the windless valleys the farmers might set out wine grapes where once only thistles grew—but the locusts were never confused. As though the older generation had whispered and chirped its knowledge to the children, the great swarms swept over the same hills and valleys, through the same mountain passes, over the same silvery streams as their forefathers.

But scarcely ever did they descend upon the same land two years in

succession. With a fine cunning they spared men and plants for a time, so that both might recover. Often many years passed between their visitations. Sometimes so many years that their memory had faded among men and only the oldsters of the villages recalled that once such an invasion had taken place.

Still mysterious, too, is the reason why a species that has descended upon a certain section of country vanishes utterly after one or two summers. It disappears from the face of the earth, leaving no trace behind. Perhaps the locusts are exterminated by parasites to which they are not immune because they dwell in a strange land, whose dangers their bodies are not equipped to combat. Perhaps they are assimilated, their species mingling with the native races and disappearing. All we know is that they vanish, if they do not return to their home.

For there are swarms that do return. The sons and grandsons of generations long since dead suddenly remember their origins. Perhaps they are aware that the valley in which they have grown fat is not their real home. Perhaps they sense that somewhere in the West there must be a sandy plateau, where grow only a few tufts of grass, a few hazelnut bushes with tough, hard leaves, and crippled pine trees. Perhaps the wind wafts a tender fragrance to them from this distant land. Perhaps, too, they feel the growing inward dismay, the awed premonition of racial death that overcomes even the most wretched of creatures when they see their numbers diminishing daily. Whatever the cause, one day they rise into the sunny skies above the Mississippi Valley and fly unerringly back to the plateau in the Rocky Mountains from which their forefathers once emerged to conquer the world.

But all this gave no knowledge of the laws that govern the formation and the behaviour of these predatory societies. The true reasons for their socialization had not been discovered.

Men began to observe the creatures as individuals. Abstracted scientists meditatively wandered through fields and gardens, and when the intoxicating summer breeze did not lure them into day-dreams, they sat down upon the moist soil in the midst of the hopping creatures, bent their heads and followed with sharp eyes the life that went on among blades of grass and stalks of wheat.

They soon discovered that the migrating locusts were of no special race; that the instinct which impelled them to cross continents was not bestowed by an ungracious God upon any chosen peoples among the grasshoppers.

The scientists could detect no organization among the active little creatures they observed. There was not the purposeful bustling of the ant heap or the rigid discipline of the beehive; there was nothing but a turbulent mob of individuals. Among them was no bond such as is necessary for the establishment of a community. Each creature cared for

itself, lived and died for itself, and behaved as though it alone existed.

The scientists shook their heads and waited. Patiently they sat, under parasols or umbrellas, observing and reasoning. They wondered whether only certain species were possessed by the migratory spirit; perhaps these alone joined together into swarms.

But because the sun shone warmly and the breeze was fragrant with hay and with all the flowers of the fields, and because they were scientists who wanted proofs for their deductions, they remained in the fields and gardens.

And then, one morning before the sun had yet risen, the unexpected, the inexplicable, took place. The individuals began to assemble into a swarm. Imperceptibly at first, then more and more definitely, they all turned and faced in one direction. Every single insect was suddenly aware that his existence was no longer to consist in planless meandering, but in a great migration to a glorious goal. A light breeze passed over the misty ground and its breath seemed to intensify their longing for distant lands. The first rays of the sun dried the dew that had settled on the locusts' wings during the night. And then the swarm rose like a silver cloud above the plain and vanished into the distance.

The scientists stood for a long time in the fields, now almost empty of grasshoppers. With lowered heads they walked slowly home, looking neither to left nor to right. They mused and reflected and reasoned. And finally they believed they had found the explanation.

For many years, they said, the ranks of the new generations of locusts are thinned. Their enemies eat them, cold rain kills them, and some years they do not emerge from the ground at all because conditions are unfavourable for them. Then comes a warm, moist spring and a dry summer. Perhaps, for some reason, the ichneumon flies are less numerous and the birds less voracious than usual.

It is a golden age for the locusts. Numbers alone form the individual insects into swarms. Because there is less room between them, or none at all, their slumbering gregarious instinct is awakened. When their bodies rub against one another, when they breathe nothing but their own exhalations and hear nothing but the sound of their own gnawing—then they become a community. They are no longer separate entities; the laws that had governed their existence as individuals are abrogated and the great mass becomes something new, something hitherto unknown, something that lives and dies in new ways.

The swarm has been born. It is not the sum of billions of individuals, but something new upon the earth and above the earth: a sharply defined cloud consisting of countless individual cells. And like a transparent shadow it hovers silently above the sun-drenched land.

HOMER MAXWELL WENT out of the church.

He held his hand over his eyes to shield them from the blinding sun. Ever since his move west, his eyelids had been inflamed. He was a little man, always coughing feebly, who seemed alien and a misfit in this environment. A weak man was wiser to remain in the cities of the East, where life was easier, more moderate and even-tempered.

When the sun shone in Arkansas City, it shone mightily; when it rained in Arkansas, there was nothing but rain. You either opened your collar, closed your eyes to slits and bore it; or you waded in high boots through the streets.

The weather was worst when the wind raged. There was no protection against the wind. You had to face it defenceless; you had nothing but your own resources for combating it. If a man's shoulders were narrow and stooped, like Homer Maxwell's, it was an unfair battle.

When Homer arrived in Arkansas, the town was still called Walnut City. That was in 1870. Afterward it had changed names three times. It had been called Adelphi, and Creswell, until finally it chose the name that it hoped to bear for all time.

When you saw Homer Maxwell trotting through the streets of Arkansas City beside his wife, you concluded at once that the decision to go west had not been his. Homer Maxwell would not have chosen to exchange the comfortable life of a clerk in Philadelphia for that of a trader in Walnut City. His wife, Betty, made the decisions in the family—that seemed clear. Betty looked like a man. She was tall, strong and broad-shouldered. It was rumoured that the scar over her right eye had been made by the knife of a hold-up man whom she had given such a beating with her bare hands that he died shortly afterward. It was also said that she could drink any man under the table. No one, however, had ever had an opportunity to test the truth of this.

The married life of the Maxwells was outwardly no different from that of other couples, and only strangers to the city still laughed at the ill-matched pair.

The Maxwell home was located on the outskirts of the city. "I can't stand seeing houses and houses and nothing else around me," Betty had said. "I want to have the feeling that I'm living on the land the way the dear Lord created it—with trees and grass and a few flowers. Not in the middle of all these jerry-built houses the Abrahams and HARRISES and JOHNSONS have put up."

In the beginning they had been surrounded only by fields and a piece of woodland and a small river lined with hazel bushes. But then the sawmill had gone up, and since then they could not look out their front windows without seeing Mr. Collin's brick monster of a building.

Betty's compensation was the fragrance of fresh-sawed wood that came to her when the wind blew in the right direction.

As the Maxwells walked home from church, they saw a man sitting in the grass at the roadside, not far from their garden gate. When the man caught sight of them, he stood up.

He was a strange-looking creature, George Hutter. He was slightly taller than Betty Maxwell, but so thin that his long shadow on the ground bore no resemblance to a human figure. It looked like the shadow of a stake on which someone had hung clothes to dry. His mother was an Indian squaw, his father a Swede. But his Nordic blood had not proved dominant. His only inheritance from Knut Solmssen was his height. Solmssen, who lived the life of a respected citizen in New Gotland in McPherson County, did not know his son—as he did not know many other children he had fathered.

"Hello, George," Betty called. "Where the devil have you come from? We haven't seen you for months."

"Where should a man come from on Holy Sunday? Straight from Heaven, of course."

They all shook hands. They went into the house, sat down on high-backed chairs, and had quick drinks of a golden-yellow whisky that Homer always kept on hand.

Their conversation consisted mostly of unanswered questions. Nevertheless, the Maxwells gathered that George Hutter had not done well over the winter. Still, he had bought a few things from the Indians that might interest Mr. Maxwell.

"Times are bad," he said. "The redskins are getting wiser every day. What's become of the good old days when they'd sell you a beaver pelt for a few nails?"

"And prices are going up all the time," Maxwell sighed. "A pound of butter costs a dollar-twenty-five, ham fifty cents, bacon seventy to eighty cents a pound. Too many people are coming out here. They all think they can pick up something. They think the gold is lying around in the streets and all they have to do is bend for it. Stinking business, I tell you, George, just stinking."

"Homer!" Betty said sharply.

"Isn't it true, what I'm saying?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"But what?" the little man shouted. The whisky had already taken effect, and he crashed his fist down on the table. "But what? I'll talk the way I like."

Betty got up and went to the kitchen. She knew the men would be hungry if they went on drinking. And they had things to discuss that she preferred not to hear. But Homer must know what he was doing. He was the man, after all. Although all Arkansas City thought she held the whip

hand, Betty knew very well that her small husband was master. In the early days of their marriage she had once said to him, "Homer, why don't you show people what you really are? Show them you're the man!" Homer had laughed at her. "This is the way I want it," he had replied. "I want them to think I'm a dwarf and you're a giant."

Betty learned her part. In public she treated Homer like a child. She pinched his cheeks and ran her big hand through his sparse hair until it appeared that he was only her plaything. Once this image had been impressed upon the hard skulls of their fellow citizens, they were able to drop the farce. For nothing could have altered an Arkansas prejudice, once established. The Maxwells' married life had been classified and the case was closed.

Hutter and Maxwell were in the midst of a peculiar conversation when Betty appeared in the doorway with steaming bowls.

"It will be the damnedest thing you ever saw," George was saying.

"And you think I should stock up on stuff that will be worthless if they don't come?"

"They will come!"

Betty set the table. The men's eyes were already alight and the words tumbled awkwardly from their lips. She hoped she had cooked enough. She knew how they were. They would fall on the slab of meat like wolves. But she did not know what they were talking about. Without saying a word, she remained standing at the table. For if they interrupted their conversation now, they might never begin again; it would be lost in the haze the whisky had created.

"But suppose they fly off somewhere else?" Homer queried, taking a long swig from his glass.

"I tell you, I know what I'm talking about," George said excitedly. "I know the beasts. They always go in the same direction—I suppose the devil shows them the way. But they always do, always."

"What are you talking about?" Betty asked.

"Locusts," Homer explained. "Georgie is trying to tell me they're going to come this year and eat up the farmers' crops. He says they eat everything and anything. So he thinks I ought to buy big stocks of food and keep some ready cash around, because we'll be able to get land for a song."

He began to laugh. His laugh was like the cackling of a hen.

"You're both drunk," Betty chided then. She began serving the meal.

The men fell silent. They chewed and smacked their lips over the tender meat and the big white potatoes, and between bites they took long drinks of whisky to wash down their food.

When the plates were empty, George ran his brown hand through his long, black Indian's hair. "I'm tired," he said. "Do you have a corner where I could sleep a little?"

They put him up in their own bed. He was asleep by the time they left the room. Homer sat down at the table with the newspaper, but his eyes closed quickly. Betty alone remained awake.

She mused over Hutter's prediction. The man was rarely wrong. Perhaps they had better stock up for the summer. Sooner or later they must make a big killing. Not that they were doing badly now—every year they had put away a few hundred. But it was slow and petty, after all. Homer was clever, and he did not lack courage. The question was, would he recognize a really big chance when it came? George, with his fox eyes, saw the gold in a manure pile. He was wise in the ways of the human race, and he knew how to take advantage of its troubles. Homer was kindhearted. Not that he burdened himself with useless scruples, but there was always something lacking in all his enterprises. Something. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. He had never quite forgotten his days as a clerk in Philadelphia.

Horse-stealing wasn't bad, of course, Betty thought. A good profit and little danger. No one would ever dream that little Maxwell was behind it, that he was the middleman for the sale of all the horses and that he had conceived the whole scheme. But it was going slower now, since the town had organized vigilantes. And, after all, it was illegal. But buying out bankrupt farmers was something else again—there was no law against that. It was just a matter of being prepared, having money when the others had none, and having the wheat the farmers would need to stave off starvation.

The sun was low in the sky when the men awoke. The three of them sat around the big table and discussed the shipment of horses out of the country. The origins of the horses were not mentioned. They were hidden in a small glen some distance from the city. Usually George arranged the actual direct sale. The Maxwells did not bother about the details.

They reckoned the profits and Homer arranged to buy goods from George with the proceeds. Thus, there was a handsome profit all around.

"Aren't you going to do anything about the locusts?" Betty asked, after the two men had come to terms.

"Locusts?" Homer's head had not yet cleared and he was unsure he had heard right.

"You know, what George was telling us about."

"Of course I know."

"Well, what about it?"

George came to Homer's rescue. He explained the situation once more. The result was that the Maxwells revised their arrangement with him; this time he would pay them part of the proceeds from the horses in cash during the summer.

George agreed, but insisted on a share in the locust business. Finally, they came to an agreement about that too. The bottles of golden whisky

were produced again, but now the men drank cautiously, taking small sips. They stared thoughtfully into space and did not light the lamps, although by now it was quite dark. It was so much more pleasant to sit in the dark and now and then close your eyes without the others seeing it.

At last Hutter took his leave. He wanted to cover the most dangerous part of his journey to-night. It was Sunday night, and the men of Arkansas would be spending their time in the saloons. Even the esteemed vigilantes were not above a drink or two.

"Take care of yourself," Homer said.

"See you soon," Betty whispered.

"See you soon." He vanished silently into the night.

The Maxwells sat down on the bench in front of their house. It was very dark and very quiet. There would be no moonrise until near dawn. Then its pale light would gleam over the plain and illuminate a dark group of horses, in whose midst the tall thin figure would ride. George would be astride his pony, with his feet almost touching the ground. Easier to dismount if necessary. But he hoped it would not be necessary.

Betty placed her arm around her husband's shoulders. It was a good life, this life of theirs. She felt happy and pleased. If everything ran smoothly, this year might mean a great change in their life. They could make the big leap upward that so many attempted and so few achieved.

A mocking smile flickered over their faces when they heard men's voices howling jubilantly from the direction of the city.

"They're having a good time," Homer said softly.

Reassured, they went to bed. Arkansas City was no exception to the rule that horse thieves can be hanged only after they are caught.

But the horse thief had been caught.

The news spread like wildfire that at last the thief was trapped. For almost a year people had lost horses from their stalls. The police had been helpless, and evil tongues had hinted at collusion. Now the thief was caught.

The men stumbled out of the saloons. Many of them could no longer stand, but they could still shout. This was the sound the Maxwells had heard.

What they did not hear was that George Hutter had not been taken into the city. The vigilantes feared the police would release him. But an oak tree would not release him, so they hanged him neatly from the lowest branch. No one spoke, and George, too, held his peace.

George's last thought was of Betty. He had always wanted to say something nice to her. She had been the only woman in his life whom he had known well.

"See you soon" were his last words.

Next morning, when the Maxwells went to town, they heard the story.

Homer stood listening, his arm under his wife's arm. He felt her arm press tightly against his and he was grateful for the support.

"He didn't say a word, the Indian didn't," the fat bartender said to him. "Now he hangs up there like a scarecrow. Every breeze shakes him back and forth. I went out to see him this morning. You'd better hurry out, if you want to see him too. I'm afraid the police will cut him down soon."

Silently, the two walked home. "There goes our money" was the first thing Homer said.

"That locust idea is out too," he added after a while.

Betty did not reply and he fell silent again. They sat down at the big table in the parlour and took out the whisky. The first glass they both gulped down as though it was pure water.

Then Betty covered her eyes with her hands and began to weep quietly. Homer had never seen his wife in tears.

He tried to console her. "We'll get our money back again," he said tenderly. His wife sprang up so abruptly that the high-backed chair crashed to the floor. She ran into her room and crashed the door to behind her. The key squeaked in the lock, and there was silence, broken only by the chirping of a cricket.

At this moment Sheriff William Hatfield cut down the stiff body of George Hutter. Carefully, he laid it on the warm earth, and several members of the town court examined it. As Judge Kelly bent over the body, a squeaking insect flew out of George Hutter's green tie and into the sunlit air.

"Wasn't that a locust?" the judge asked.

When the locusts come forth upon the earth, they have no wings. They are wretched little creatures, more outlandish in appearance than they are when full grown.

They seem naked. But they arouse no pity, for their nakedness is accompanied by bustling activity. They do not sit still, helplessly rubbing their eyes because they are unused to the sunlight. They behave, rather, as though they know perfectly well what to do with these gentle summer days, as though the grass and flowers grow for them alone.

From the very first they have that hard expression in their eyes which makes them appear so malicious. Perhaps this is because they are eternally hungry. Men and animals that never have enough gaze out at the world with locusts' eyes.

During the months of their growth, they come to terms with their ugliness. Their proportions improve; thorax and head no longer make up the greater part of the body. Perhaps, too, we are willing to forgive a grown-up beast more ugliness than an innocent cub.

From sunrise until the last light fades from the sky they are continually

in motion. By the time the moon rises they have settled on the underside of grass stalks or leaves, in a sort of slumber. And at dawn they are wrapped in a thick shroud of dew that makes them almost invisible.

Twice they slough their skins. And then, almost three weeks to the hour after their birth, they are overcome by a kind of intoxication. Not even the hot morning sun can awaken them to their usual repulsive bustling. Long after the dew has dried the locusts are motionless. Now and then one will attempt an uncertain step, but it is a feeble movement that bears no resemblance to their ordinary practical activity. They are dazed. They seem under a cloud, and not even the juiciest grass lures their hungry mouths. Head down, they hang to the places where they spent the night, and only the sharp-eyed can distinguish them from their surroundings.

Ears finer than the human organs would hear the faint snap that must sound when the skin of the locust's neck suddenly bursts. Just back of the ugly horse's head the first tiny crack appears.

The second crack forms behind the neatly folded wings. It is somewhat larger, and the faint breeze that is sweeping among the blades of grass strikes the new skin for the first time. The insect seems to twitch at the touch. The opening in the old skin spreads. And now the locust begins working systematically. Its twitching and squirming becomes purposeful. It no longer writhes wildly, but begins skilfully to stamp its way out of the old skin. And it does not cease its efforts until the very ends of its legs are free of the old rags.

In twelve minutes the metamorphosis is complete; the locusts have donned their new dress. Now they use their legs to unroll the wings. Again and again they stroke the crumpled wings until they seem comparatively smooth. At the same time they move them in a rapid flutter, as though airing blankets that have just been taken out of storage.

During the rest of the day they move only in order to follow the sun. As soon as the shadow of a leaf or blade of grass falls upon them, they crawl away a little. And then they sit still again, motionless for hours at a time, bathing their greenish bodies in the sun.

A new stage of their lives has begun. With unwinking eyes they gaze up at the reddening sky. Now and then one of them spreads its wings once more to smooth out the last wrinkles. The glow of sunset shimmers in their wings and the wind picks up the fluttering sound.

They remain still all night. Their intoxication is past, and the days of their youth as crawlers on the ground are forgotten.

The rays of the sun rising over the distant mountains arouse them. A breath of wind picks up the first locust and bears it far up to dizzying heights.

Before its pinlike eyes lie the plateaus of Colorado, and the air is redolent with the sweet fragrance of the flourishing wheatfields of Kansas.

PATRICIA CORONI LOOKED around the big room.

She was a small, frail woman; had she really wanted to survey the room, she would have had to stand on a chair. She was not really a beautiful woman. But there was something about her eyes that made the men gasp.

That meant a good deal in Alma. For from the very first Lizzy and Clarissa had been in town, and whenever these two came to a prospector's town they turned it upside down.

Like trophies of war, the wooden crosses above the graves of men who had died because of them stood in cemeteries from California to Colorado. Their smiles were fixed in their faces, and not even the cold breath of dying men could blanch them. They shrugged their shoulders at Death himself, and Clarissa, whose origins were French, would sometimes underscore their indifference with a grotesque: "*C'est la vie.*"

Patricia Coroni was an unknown. None of the men had ever seen her before. She turned up in Alma one day, and that evening there was one of the biggest brawls John Borden, the owner of the White Horse, had ever had the pleasure to see.

It began with the women.

"What you doing here?" Lizzy had asked.

"None of your business," Patricia had replied.

"I'll scratch your face till you look like a carrot grater if you're thinking of breaking in on my hunting ground."

"I suppose you're afraid, you old hag, that I'll take away a few of your goldfish."

"You say old hag to me!"

"Ah *non*," Clarissa intervened, "this is too much." And then she drew freely from the copious vocabulary of her mother, who had once been famous in the circle of the Dames des Halles in Paris. She screamed it, half in French, half in translated English, at Patricia.

The men came over.

"Shut up, shut up," the saloon-keeper crooned, knowing well what the end would be. It was too late. Patricia had seized Clarissa by the hair and struck her in the face with her hard little fist. Before Lizzy could interfere, Clarissa lay on the floor screaming, with bright streams of blood running from her nose. Possibly it would have ended there if the men had not intervened. Lizzy would have taken her punishment and an understanding been established.

But Gerry Whitman, who was afraid for Lizzy, seized Patricia by the shoulders, probably just to separate the two women. Albert Parker, seeing him, hit him so hard between the eyes that he flew back against

the table where Gilbert Morrison, Jonathan Ginzburger and Ben Witters were playing poker for high stakes.

The three men jumped up. There followed a wordless general brawl. The only sounds were the howls of Clarissa, who still lay on the floor, the thud of blows and the smashing of furniture.

Later on, the evening turned out to be a jolly one. Patricia made up with the two women and even presented some salve to Clarissa, whose face was badly swollen. The salve Patricia always carried with her, in readiness for such encounters. An enamoured Chinese had given it to her the year before in a golden box.

The friendship between Patricia and Albert Parker started that evening.

The man was hardly different from the others. He had already been rich and poor, lucky and unlucky. He had spent all his life in the gold towns of the West, and he began work on each new claim with the best resolutions.

It always ended by his finding that the sand no longer contained any nuggets of gold, and one night he vanished as poor as he had come. Now and then a girl for whose sake he had ruined himself would give him a grubstake. But he never asked a man to help him.

A stranger came in. Patricia did not see him until he was standing in front of her. He was extraordinarily big. His face resembled a kindly full moon, with the corn-yellow curly hair that surrounded it.

"Hello, baby," he said.

"What do you want?" Patricia asked.

"How about a whisky?"

"Let me alone."

The man came closer. Some of the others in the room glanced around to see how the girl would deal with the big man.

"Nice legs you've got," he said, and made a pass at her.

"Don't block my view and keep your hands to yourself."

The big man disregarded her determined tone.

"So little and so stuck-up!" he rumbled good-naturedly.

He should not have tried to lift her off the chair. There was a sharp sound as when one pats a horse's neck, as Patricia's fists struck him hard just below the nose. He reeled back. For a moment he closed his eyes, slightly dizzy. When he opened them again, he saw everyone smiling delightedly. There was a tense moment of suspense.

John Borden, the saloon-keeper, turned pale when he saw the big man reach for a chair. The brawl on the night of Patricia's arrival had been bad enough. Since then he had hung mirrors on the walls to make the room more elegant, and three days ago he had added a *Leda and the Swan* to the portrait of the Countess Potocki.

"Hey, there!" he shouted.

But even as he spoke it was all over. The big man had swung the chair over his head and smashed it on the floor so that the tough wood splintered into fragments.

Then he turned on his heel and went over to the bar.

"Whisky," he said.

Just at that moment Parker came in.

With half-closed eyes he stood still for a moment and looked around. They he saw Patricia, still sitting quietly.

"Hello, you dwarf," he called.

The girl jumped up. Like a small cat, she darted among the men and tables until she reached him. Her eyes were wide and filled with laughter. She had been worried about him.

"Why've you kept me waiting so long, Albert?" she asked.

"This is why," he said, and began to unwrap a package.

He did not look down at his hands; he kept his eyes on the girl. He was eager not to miss any phase of her surprise and the delight in her eyes when she saw what he had brought for her.

Everyone had turned to look at the two. The only one in the room who did not turn around was the stranger, who was standing at the bar, drinking.

The paper fell crackling to the floor.

"Albert, Albert!" Patricia cried breathlessly. Ardent, she looked at the tiny shoes with their heels of pure silver.

Lizzy and Clarissa and the other girls and men trotted up to them to exclaim over the delicately fashioned little pumps.

"Put them on," Clarissa cried.

"Parker must put them on her himself," Lizzy suggested.

The men lifted Patricia on their shoulders. Albert Parker drew off her old shoes. Tenderly, he put on the new ones. Loud cheers resounded when the ceremony was ended.

"Dance!" the men shouted. "Patricia must dance."

The band began to play a kind of French cancan. The men formed a circle. A few pieces of the smashed chair still lay on the floor.

Patricia began. Her first figures were slow and careful, as though she were feeling her way, getting used to dancing on silver. With every step the shoes made a low clicking sound.

Patricia's tempo increased. The men began to beat time with their hands and to stamp their heavy boots on the floor. Dust flew up and the room groaned and shook. Above all the noise sounded the tap-tap of the silver heels, like the pattering of hailstones.

Patricia's face glowed feverishly and her eyes filled with a drunken sparkle. Her joints loosened; her body was weightless. Her movements were wilder and freer, her legs no longer seemed to touch the floor.

A demonic force had seized her and raged within her, distorting her muscles, contorting her limbs.

She became a Menad. Possessed. The demon blinded her eyes and stopped her ears. She danced herself free, free of all the earthbound ugliness that held her down—the saloon, the lust of the men, the greed of the pimps and saloon-keepers, all the gaudy misery of her life.

Then the music stopped and she collapsed on the floor. Her legs spread apart involuntarily and she strained her head back. All around her was howling tumult. She saw the men's shoes and their pants and shirts, and then their heads with drunken faces, and then she felt Parker's hands as he lifted her like a child.

No one had noticed that the stranger at the bar had fallen to the ground. Borden, the saloon-keeper, saw it first. He went over to the man and kicked him in the ribs.

"Hey," he said.

The man on the floor did not answer. His face was grey and his body twitched convulsively.

Borden thought for a moment that he was drunk. A few other men came over. They stared at the man and wiped their faces, and some of them hastily downed a glass of whisky because their throats were dry from shouting.

"I think he's poisoned," Lizzy said.

"Shut your face," Borden growled.

"I didn't mean anything," the girl mumbled. "I didn't mean anything about your drinks."

"Maybe she's right," Clarissa said. "I once saw a girl who'd taken rat poison. A whole boxful. She looked like that."

Parker came over to the group. He knelt beside the man and opened his shirt. He took the stranger's head in his arm and tried to pour whisky into his mouth. Patricia stood by, arms akimbo, turning her feet out so that she could see the silver heels.

"I think we ought to ask Ginzburger," Parker said finally.

Jonathan Ginzburger was playing poker with his friends in the back room. He didn't like being disturbed at his games. But after all, it was something when a man collapsed and fainted and lay there with a face as grey as the wet sand of a claim.

Ginzburger came. He was an unimpressive little man, an habitu  of the gold rush country. He sold tools to the diggers, finding this more profitable than digging gold himself. For many years he had been a familiar figure in the camps of the prospectors, and at one time or another he had given most of them a stake. Whatever he earned from them he regularly lost back in poker games, and at the end of the season, when he packed his wares, he was usually a little poorer than at the beginning. When friends protested that this was no way to live,

he shrugged. "What of it?" he said. "My life I already had and I never got afraid from the Cossacks."

He knelt beside the stranger and examined his body. Then he stood up slowly. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his hands. Then he shook his head and shrugged, and finally he said in a low but clearly audible voice:

"I think it is the cholera."

Almost immediately the men decided to send the women out of the camp. The married women could be taken to a nearby town. The others were simply told to get out; they could take care of themselves.

From the stranger's papers they learned that his name was Eddy Vandenberg and that he had a claim some distance from the town. Parker, Patricia and Ginzburger followed when he was carried to his camp. The men unhinged the White Horse's front door and placed the sick man on it. They bore him slowly and wordlessly along the street. The lanterns gave just enough light for them to see the stones in the road. It was windy, but the cool air made them all feel better. It sobered them, and they talked in low voices with Ginzburger, who knew a little about the difference between life and death, as he knew a little about everything.

Eddy was laid in his tent and the men returned to the White Horse with the door. The others built a big fire.

"Hot water we need, lots of hot water," Ginzburger said.

He sent Parker down to the brook. Again and again Parker went down and brought water in Vandenberg's pail. They heated it over the fire, and when the water boiled, soaked in it an old shirt they found in the tent; Ginzburger wrung it loosely and placed the rag on Vandenberg's body. It was so hot that the man's skin turned red and he groaned feebly. "Shut up," Ginzburger growled. "It has to be. Do you think for my fun I do it?"

The man was utterly changed. When the first light of dawn entered the tent, his full face had become a death mask. But his giant's body was the same, and that made his appearance all the more terrible.

Parker and Patricia stayed with the stranger all day. The girl sat in front of the tent, still wearing her dancing dress. Parker laid his head in her lap and both listened to the sick man's groans. The water in the kettle boiled all the time, and when it ran low Parker went down to the brook with the pail and fetched more.

Neither of them knew quite why they were taking care of Eddy Vandenberg.

"I think it's just because no one else has," Parker said.

"I think so too," Patricia agreed, laughing softly.

"A fine reason."

"Why not? Someone has to do it. Why not us just as well as any others?"

"It's catching."

"I know. If you're the kind that wants to live forever, you keep away from a man who's down with cholera. For someone like me it doesn't matter."

Parker was silent for a while. Then he spat and said, "For me too."

And so they remained until that evening when Parker himself fell sick. Dusk was falling when he felt the first touch of the disease. He grew dizzy and lay back with closed eyes. Perhaps it was his tiredness, he thought, or hunger, or the infected air from Vandenberg's tent.

"Is anything the matter?" Patricia asked.

He wanted to give some manly, scornful retort, but it was too late. The convulsions carried him away; he could no longer open his mouth without screaming. And what was the use of saying anything now? It was all over and done with.

Patricia dragged him into the tent. When she came out again, it was almost dark; the fire had burned down and there was little water in the kettle. Bats came and the fog, and in the tent the two men groaned, and the devil knew she couldn't care for both alone.

It was the devil who was behind it all, anyway, trying to take away the little she had in her life. Her father had been a poor Italian mason and a clever man; he had always said that nothing was too petty for the devil's greed.

"He likes to devour the poor man's only goat just as well as the rich man's herd," her father had said. "He devours what he can get if you let him."

She took up the pail and went to the brook. It was so dark that she could scarcely find the path. Coming back it would be easier because Vandenberg was groaning and she would only have to follow his voice to find the tent. But it was not necessary, because Ginzburger returned.

She saw his lantern from afar and began to call. Soon the little man came up to her and she told him about Parker.

"Hell," he said. He took the water from her and they climbed up to the tent.

On the way he suddenly stood still. "The other women has cleared out," he said. "The married ones too. There is no blame on them if they don't want to stay in Alma and die from the cholera. I think you should go away too. I think nobody should stay here who wants to live."

"Shut up," Patricia said.

"What do you mean, shut up?"

"How do I know why I want to stay here? How do I know why I don't tie up my bundle and put the dancing shoes on top and go lay

for the men in some other town? Maybe because my father said you should never let the devil get away with anything. Maybe that's why. Understand?"

Ginzburger walked on. After a while he said:

"He must have been a smart man, Coroni papa."

During that night the old man and the girl alternated in caring for the sick men. Next morning Vandenberg looked like a lump of clay.

The sun had not yet appeared over the hill. Ginzburger and Patricia sat shivering in front of the tent. There was the smell of coffee that Ginzburger was making. Patricia had closed her eyes and was leaning against the tent cloth. If only she could have slept a few hours it would be different, she was sure. She would have been able to go on. But it was no use as it was. As it was, the devil would be stronger.

"I don't think I have the strength for two," she said in a low voice.

"What?" Ginzburger asked.

"I think two are too many," she repeated. "I think that's why we can't save Vandenberg."

"Did you make for him less compresses than the other?"

"No, but I don't think it has anything to do with that."

"What then?"

"How do I know? I can't explain it to you. I'm not a priest."

"Why a priest?"

"Because it has something to do with that."

Ginzburger poured coffee into a cup and handed it to her. She sipped the coffee slowly, and between sips she put the cup on the ground so that Ginzburger would not see how her hand was trembling.

Vandenberg died toward evening. Just before the end, he gave Patricia a leather purse filled with gold nuggets.

When he was dead, Patricia cried a little. Then they pulled the body by the legs out of the tent and laid it in the grass. They covered it with a coat. Together, they drank half of a big bottle of whisky that had belonged to the dead man. And all the while they kept applying hot compresses to Parker. They talked little. Toward morning Ginzburger fell asleep. He lay before the fire, his hat over his face, more like a bundle of old clothes than a human being.

Patricia remained awake, cursing and praying. Every time she passed Ginzburger she kicked him, and when he did not stir she swore at him. "Mangy dog," she spat, "you stinking, drunken heel. Leaving a woman all alone. Sleep, you son of a bitch, sleep. Holy St. Francis, did you ever see anything like it!"

She toiled to the fire and back to the tent and to the fire again and back to the tent again. When Parker began to shiver with cold and his teeth chattered and all the blankets didn't help, she took off her clothes.

She spread them over him and then she lay down beside him. He did not notice, but toward dawn the convulsions moderated.

Dusk was falling when they buried Vandenberg. It was the first grave that had been dug in Alma, and they chose the location carefully—one where there could be no gold. It was among the shrubbery, where the soil was black and heavy and fruitful, not sandy and full of gold.

Most of the men came. They tied their horses to shrubs, or held the reins in their hands. All of them had removed their hats, but then they found themselves confronted with a problem none of them had expected.

There was no priest among them, and no Christian prayer-book because they had all come from work. All of them knew a few words from some proverb or psalm, and almost all of them knew the Lord's Prayer. But still they felt it would be better to give Eddy Vandenberg a little more than that to accompany him on his way. All of them lived close to death; they felt it was not enough simply to stutter the Lord's Prayer and then throw earth on the coffin. He who held them all in the palm of His hand, the Lord of Life and Death, might take it amiss. And if cholera was raging, it would be a good idea to get on the right side of Him, even if ordinarily He was seldom in their thoughts.

Jonathan Ginzburger always carried with him a few badly tattered pages of an Old Testament. It was written in Hebrew, for he had taken it with him from Kiev—it was the only memento of his youth. No one knew what had become of the rest of the book.

With his small black cap on his head, he stepped up to the open grave. First he read the text in Hebrew. No one understood the words, but they all felt better because something solemn was taking place; it reminded them, at least, of a Christian burial. Then Jonathan translated. He translated slowly, word for word:

"And the Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, that they may come up upon the land of Egypt and eat every herb of the land, even all that the hail hath left.

"And Moses stretched forth his rod over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day, and all that night; and when it was morning, the east wind brought the locusts.

"And the locusts went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt: very grievous were they; before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such.

"For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt."

Jonathan Ginzburger carefully closed the pages and replaced them in

his pocket. He carried them in the pocket the others used for carrying their guns.

He took off his little cap. All began repeating the Lord's Prayer. Then they placed the coffin in the hole they had dug. It was almost night by now. Like low drumbeats the clods of earth thudded against the big box that one of the men had knocked together.

In the darkness Ginzburger went back to Patricia. Parker was weak and Patricia was near exhaustion. "I don't think I can keep it up much longer," she said.

"Sleep a few hours," Ginzburger suggested. "Sleep patches up the holes in the world."

He took the stub of a candle from his pocket, held it over the fire until the bottom grew soft and then pressed it against a stone. He lit it carefully with a splinter of wood. It was Friday evening.

"Silverheel" and Ginzburger saved Albert Parker's life. Or perhaps it was not yet his time to die. After he recovered, he and Patricia vanished from the neighbourhood. Ginzburger alone knew where they had gone, and he said nothing. No one would have believed that the two were going to use Vandenberg's gold, and what little Parker himself had found, to buy a farm in Kansas. This was the mystery of the human heart. A whore danced in the world on silver heels, and all the while she dreamed of being a farmer woman. A prospector grubbed for gold and slept with a different whore every night, and in reality all he wanted was a patch of land, a wife and possibly children, chickens and an apple tree and a bench in front of the house. Yes, wonderful were the ways of God. Old Ginzburger knew it. Dear God in Heaven, he knew it.

Soon afterwards the locusts also began their eastward migration.

7

GEORGE HILPERT AND Francis Lacoste were strange creatures. From a distance they looked like scarecrows that some mad jester had set up on the prairie. Their clothes were too big for them, there were rents in their hats, and their faces and hands were so dirty that the natural shade could no longer be guessed. They had long beards of a peculiar yellowish hue, and the Adam's apples in their long necks moved like dirty blobs when they spoke.

No one knew how old they were. Whenever they told tales, people had the feeling that they had lived as long as the Wandering Jew, that they had first seen the light of day many centuries ago. Their eyes were so melancholy that women cried when they looked into them. Their voices were reminiscent of the plaintive howl of hyenas, and their words usually insinuated that all things in this world came to a bad end.

Their little tent stood at different times in many places on the prairie. It could hardly be distinguished from the burned grass and the sandy soil. There were holes in it, and it was torn at the edges, but it sufficed them. Had anyone asked them why they had never bought a new tent, they would have gazed blankly at the questioner.

They had arrived only a few days before in this new territory along the Arkansas River. Beneath a russet cliff they had set up their shelter, and then they had taken deep breaths of the air, drawing it slowly into their long, thin noses. They had an infallible faculty for scenting whether they had chosen a favourable location.

"Bad," George said, shaking his head slowly.

"Not too good," Francis agreed, and spat.

Then the two simultaneously lifted their hands to their eyes and surveyed the territory. The land they beheld was flat as far as the eye could see. Like tiny boils, dry clumps of grass lay on the ground, and the scattered rocky outcroppings made the land all the more wretched and lonesome.

After a while they set out on their search. They did not speak. Like dogs following a trail, they sniffed the air. Their eyes gazed up at the sky, watching for the black birds that hover over heaps of bones. For heaps of bones were what they sought.

In former years the buffalo had been slaughtered here by the thousands. No one had ever had the time or the inclination to bother about the remains. Wherever the beasts had fallen, their great bodies had lain. The flesh had rotted. The birds and the ants had fed upon it, but the bones had remained.

George and Francis quarrelled endlessly about who had first conceived the idea of collecting these bones. Both men had prospected for gold and herded cattle and traded hides, but they had remained poor. Like nearly all the men of the West, bad luck had dogged their footsteps.

One day they had been walking dolefully through the boisterous streets of Atchison, cursing silently to themselves. George had said, "Too bad we can't make gold out of dirt."

"Out of garbage," Francis suggested.

They passed a pile of bones that lay in the street in front of a butcher-shop.

"Out of this stuff," George said, and kicked the bones.

"Out of buffalo bones," Francis growled.

They mentioned the matter to a man from the East, and he told them about button manufacturers and said something about fertilizer, and shortly afterward they began practising their new trade. But they were never able to settle the question of who had first conceived the idea.

Their big feet stirred up small clouds of dust as they shuffled over the prairie. They carried an axe and a saw with them. Often they stood still

and then started off in a different direction, guided by some mysterious instinct.

When they turned around, they could see in the distance the place where their camp must be, for the high pole they had set up, on which waved a rag torn out of a shirt, was visible from far away.

As is the habit of men who do the same work every day, they paid no attention to their surroundings. However, they hated the sunny sky and cursed the hot sand under their feet. The odd forms of rocks or half-withered shrubs deceived their eyes and conjured up images of giant buffalo skeletons. Or else they turned away because they were afraid something lurked behind. Therefore they hated bushes and boulders. Everything that was large and wild and strange hampered their work.

"Birds," George said, and stood still.

With outstretched necks they descended into a small pocket. Dead shrubbery blocked their view. They hunched their shoulders and pushed through the withered branches.

"Smell anything?" Francis asked.

"Shut up." George took alarm at the slightest display of optimism.

But there was no doubt about it. The air was filled with a sweetish, repulsive stench. It was almost too strong for a good find; usually the buffalo had been killed some time ago and the odour of decay was so faint that only their trained noses could perceive it. Perhaps a horse had died here recently.

Their doubts gave way to amazement when they finally emerged from the undergrowth. Before them lay a small glen. From end to end it was filled with buffalo bones. Most of the skeletons were still in one piece. They were a yellowish white, and the ribs looked like tongs that were about to close on something.

"What the hell?" Francis gaped.

"It's a dream," George said.

He stepped forward and ran his hand over a skeleton.

It was real. The bones felt like all bones that wind and sun have played with for a while. Some had burst or broken, and sharp splinters projected. But most of them were round and smooth, as they had been within the bodies of the animals.

Some of the animals lacked heads. But the heads were still on most of the skeletons. They lay sidewise on the ground, and some still had the thick clumps of hair upon their brows that had almost covered their small eyes.

The two men set to work. They had no desire to consider their curious find. They had to work fast. It was necessary to make bones of the skeletons, to break them up, so that they could be transported in ox-carts. Francis and George had made this find. By all rights it belonged to them. But what could they do if others came to take it away from them? They were old men. Who cared about their rights?

They took off their coats. Their shirts were ragged, and the cloth was hard and brittle because their sweat had soaked into the fibres and dried there. There were patches of dark cloth on the elbows, and they had tied bits of string to the ends of their suspenders and wound them around the buttons, because the original leather straps had ripped off long ago.

They had a system for breaking up buffalo skeletons. At first each had worked alone. But soon they had realized that the bones were too heavy and clumsy for one man. They found they had to work together. Naturally, a good deal depended on how old the bones were. If they had only to be picked up, that was another matter. Sometimes they just tapped a skeleton and it fell apart. Then they had nothing to do but gather up the bones and make a pile of them. Anyone could do that. But here it was different.

Cartilage still held most of the bones together. Only the more tender pieces had fallen away or been devoured by scavengers. But the thick cartilages were still in place. They had become hard and brittle and fibrous, of course, but it was nevertheless an effort to separate the bones.

George and Francis began on the ribs. Each animal had fourteen. Sometimes a few good blows of the axe upon the vertebræ were sufficient to turn the great chest of a buffalo into a heap of bones. But with these skeletons they had to break out each rib separately. Ants scurried over their hands and the sweat flowed down the side of their noses into their beards. Sometimes they wiped their faces with the backs of their hands. They breathed loudly, with half-open mouths. Now and then they spat, or they took a drink from their common flask.

The bones of the back always gave them the most trouble. Especially those that had supported the muscles of the head. They were disconcertingly big and unwieldy things. However, they added a good deal to the weight, and were therefore among the most valuable bones in the skeletons. Often the men had to use a pinch bar and hammer away at the joints in order to break them loose.

The legs of the buffalo always disappointed them. They were slender and delicate; it was hard to understand how such a monster could walk upon those slender legs. But there was nothing to do about it; they had to take the skeletons the way the Lord had made them. They were content as long as there were some to take. There were rumours that buffalo hunting would soon be prohibited. What would they live on if that happened? No one would consider them, of course, when such a law was passed.

But this tragedy had not descended upon them yet. This was the find of their life, this field. If only they could exploit it in peace. The longer they worked the more absorbed they became in their work. The sound of their axe blows did not reverberate beyond the little valley. They

were magnificently alone, and the surrounding hills prisoned all sound. When they called to each other, the sound reached the ear and then was smothered by the midday heat or caught by the bushes on the rim of the valley.

They did not look up until the sun disappeared behind a dark cloud.

It was more than a cloud. It was a wall. For a moment the rim of it gleamed like a fiery corona. But gradually the golden fringe paled.

"Goddam," George said.

"Hm," Francis growled, and took a drink from the bottle.

A gust of wind blew a handful of sand into his face. He spat and wiped the sand from his tongue with his fingers.

"We'd better hurry," he said.

"I'm staying here," George replied. He drew his coat over his sweat-soaked shirt.

Again came a gust of wind. They could hear it approaching from far off, because the bushes rattled and snapped.

The wind was cold. A shiver ran down Francis' back, and he too put on his coat.

"You're crazy to stay here," he said.

"How can we leave this alone all night?"

"It won't run away!"

"Since when don't we sleep on our claims?"

Francis wanted to reply, but the wind snatched the words out of his mouth and distorted them into incomprehensible sounds.

"The devil!" he cursed, when the wind paused for a moment. Slowly he followed George toward the shelter of the bushes.

The first thunderclap came like a violent explosion. The two cowered in the underbrush. They squatted on their heels, rather than on the earth, and turned up their collars. It had become very dark. For a moment there was a profound silence. The two men could just see the bones of the buffalo, at least the first of them, and the heaps of broken bones they had gathered.

A distant hissing in the air grew louder. It was like the sound of water steaming on the hot iron surface of a stove.

"Sand," George said, and tried to button his lapels. There were no buttons, and so he held his hand on his chest, below his throat.

Francis followed his example. Then the first trickle of sand came. At first it was a gentle sound, the sound of sand falling on the branches and on the dry leaves of the underbrush, and on the ground. The sound that is produced when dry foliage is shaken. More and more sand fell, and the air seemed filled by a thick cloud. The men could no longer see even the nearest buffalo skeletons. The sound now was like the sound of tearing paper.

The men growled inaudible words when the first real gust of sand

struck. They felt a thousand pinpricks on the backs of their necks, above the line of the collar, and in their ears and against their chins. Then the wind ceased to blow from a single direction. It seemed to come from everywhere at once, and the sand was all around them. It was on their lips, in their mouths, in their eyes, their nostrils and their ears. They spat it out. They dug it out of the corners of their eyes with sandy fingers. They sneezed. They ran their fingers under their collars. They drew their hats farther down over their eyes. But nothing helped, and the grains of sand began to itch in their hair and on their bodies.

They kept their eyes closed to slits. Unconsciously, a smile of pleasure widened their mouths when a flash of lightning illuminated the field of bones.

Then the rain came, waves of it. It took the sand from the air; it cleaned their faces and washed the grains of sand deeper down under their collars. They began to shiver with cold, and they moved closer together. Their hands were already cold, although their bodies were still warm. The ground under their feet grew slippery. Small streamlets formed and rushed past them. They sat immobile. They knew this was the best thing they could do.

After a while the cold crept up their legs to their bellies. Their clothes stuck to their skin. When they exhaled, gaps were formed between their bodies and the cloth, and the wind whipped into the gaps and cooled their wet skins. They leaned their shoulders together, and only where their two bodies touched did they feel a trace of warmth.

So they sat, waiting, with lowered heads. The water dripped from the brims of their hats to their legs. They smelled the odour of wet cloth. When they shifted their positions, the water squished in their shoes. Whenever they wriggled their toes, they forced air under their heels. It tickled. They had to hold their heads up a little, lest the water from their beards drip through the openings in their jackets.

When the storm abated for a moment, they heard the howl of a coyote. Then the sound stopped suddenly and there was silence except for the gurgling of the water flowing past them down the hill. Then came a terrible thunderclap; the sky seemed to descend on them.

"Hail!" George roared suddenly.

Something hard had struck his shoulder, rebounded and thudded to the ground. Again he was struck, and again, and then Francis, too, cried out. The wind drove the things into their faces and they felt a series of tiny impacts against their bodies. But they were lighter than hailstones. The things were hard and angular, but sometimes they felt light as leaves, and often oddly soft.

The crackling and pattering was so loud around them that they could not hear each other. The wind and the hail whipped through the withered branches and the sound was like waves breaking on a shore.

The hail became thicker and thicker. Lightning flashed, and they saw it: the air seemed filled with snowflakes. But it did not cling to the ground. In fact the ground seemed to grow steadily darker the longer the hail lasted.

Francis felt something tickling him inside his beard. He scratched himself with one hand, at the same time trying to keep his coat closed with the other. His stiff fingers felt something peculiarly hard and alive in the hair. When they finally closed on it, he felt little legs kicking wildly. He turned it between his fingers and rough wings rubbed against his skin. Then he felt the soft abdomen crushed to a sticky mess.

"Ugh," he said, and wiped his hand on his trousers.

Then he turned and shouted in George's ear: "Locusts!"

As suddenly as it had begun, the hail ceased. The wind died down and only the rain remained.

"A swarm blown off its course," Francis said. He turned around so that he was squatting face to face with George.

"Can they harm the bones?" George asked.

"Don't be a fool. When the sun dries them off, they'll fly away."

Both men fell silent and stared into the rain. They felt relieved that the bolts of lightning were coming from farther and farther away.

They grew tired of squatting on their heels, and since they were soaked through, anyway, they sat down in the midst of the streams of water. For a moment their buttocks dammed the water, then it divided around them and flowed along their legs down into the valley.

When the rain stopped finally, Francis fell asleep, in spite of the cold and the wetness.

He started out of his sleep when he heard George's voice.

"Well, how long do you think it will take us to clean up this field?"

"A week maybe. Why? Can't you let an old man sleep?"

"I have an idea what we could do with the money from these here bones."

"Can't it wait till to-morrow?"

"Suppose we buy up farms from the farmers whose crops are devoured? Follow the locust swarm and keep buying farms. Just lay cash on the line and get the land for a song. What about it?"

For a while they did not speak. They watched a damp mist filling the valley. The sky grew lighter and they saw that it was already dusk. But they were so tired they did not stir. They were afraid to move at all in their wet clothes. Finally, they turned on the slippery earth and again leaned their backs against each other.

"Let's sleep," Francis said.

"What about my idea?"

"I've been thinking about that for hours myself. Let's sleep now."

Old liar, George thought, and closed his eyes.

The wet buffalo bones glistened silver in the light of the rising moon. The silver puddles rippled continually because hordes of locusts were kicking and struggling. The dampness on the wings of those that hung in the bushes began to evaporate. Slowly the ground soaked up the water and the streamlets on the slope dried out.

By dawn the puddles, too, had vanished. In wet, kicking clumps the locusts lay on the ground impatiently awaiting the sun. And the two old men slept peacefully in the mud, as though their beds were of softest down.

PART TWO

THE STORY

I

THEY COME TO LIFE

THE AIR ABOVE the valleys of the Arkansas and the Missouri had absorbed all the warm moisture it could hold. Like a shimmering cloud it hung above the rivers and smothered every breath of wind. Small pools of stagnant water lay at the foot of trees, and their greenish-yellow surfaces were as dull as the sky they sought to reflect.

A swarm of gnats buzzed over a dead mouse. The sweetish odour of putrefaction maddened them. Their glistening bodies darted jerkily through the air. When they settled to feed, they did so all at once, so that the little corpse seemed covered with a network of glass beads. In infinitesimal bites they gradually consumed the mouse.

Farther to the west, where the land sloped upward, the sky was lighter, and the air men breathed was hot and dry. The farmers stood in their fields with big round hats on their heads and observed that there were less weeds than usual because of the dryness. Here and there a lone poppy stood among the wheat, and the cornflowers grew only on the edges of the cultivated land. Dung beetles lumbered over the cracked earth on heavy, awkward legs. Lizards sunned themselves on the stones that had been heaped along the roads when the prairie was first ploughed. They lay motionless, and only the beating pulse on the underside of their heads revealed that they were alive. Motionless, too, was the wavy hair grass, because the wind that usually blew from Colorado had been imprisoned by the hills of Arapahoe County.

When the farmers looked up at the sky they turned their heads toward the west, where bits of cloud sometimes made their appearance above the peaks of the Rockies. The men raised their broad, thick hands to their eyes to shield them against the dazzling rays of the sun. They stood motionless, trying to fix in their minds the shape of the clouds, so that they could look again after a few minutes and decide whether they had grown or diminished. When the fluffy morsels of white gradually vanished, they shook their heads with concern. Then they went on hoeing the earth.

Toward the west the land rose steadily. Gentle breezes wandered

from the pockets among the hills. The sky became deep blue and the sun lost its usual aura. It shone from out of the deepest blue, and when the sheep-herders in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains turned their faces toward it they could feel the weight of its rays upon their skin. Coyotes that had circled sniffing around the herds of sheep grew weary and sat down in the shadows of the rocks. They ran their tongues over their lips, raised their heads and yawned. High above them a few wild sheep climbed a rubble-covered slope, and the small stones their hoofs loosened began to roll downhill. They bobbed past the coyotes, who looked up sleepily. They saw something moving in the distance. The blinding flames upon the rocks made it unrecognizable, and after a while they laid their snouts on their forefeet and went to sleep.

Still farther west, in Utah, children played in front of houses surrounded by vegetable gardens. Their small brown hands dug trenches and they pretended their ditches were full of water. Like the elders, they gazed up at the sky with wrinkled brows and slightly squinting eyes. The sky was so crystal-clear they could see to its profoundest depths.

Now and then a child ran to a well and brought a pail of water to pour into the trench. The water was sucked at once into the parched earth. For a while there was a patch of brown mud, and then it was all as dry as before.

When the children tired of playing, they sat down on a small slope. An apple tree whose leaves were already turning yellow, although the fruit had not yet ripened, provided shade for them. They laid their ears to the ground and listened to the insects crawling in the grass. Sometimes they caught a grasshopper that had wandered on to their bellies. They held the creatures in their clumsy, dirty little hands, and threw them away when a brown liquid dribbled from the ugly mouths. Then the children wiped their wet fingers on their clothes.

After a while they turned over and rested their heads in their hands. They chewed the grass, and now and then they spit out small fibres that had caught in their teeth.

Their eyes were on a level with the cabbage, which was still weak and delicate. A farmer had planted it as an experiment; otherwise this piece of land would have lain fallow. It seemed to be a failure.

Finally the children pillowed their heads on their arms and closed their eyes.

On the north, Utah passes without any natural boundary into Idaho.

There, too, the farmers had seen no clouds for a long time. The wind sighed from dawn to dusk through Bear Lake County, and sometimes, at night, it became so violent that the people were kept awake by the rattling of their windows. The men left their beds and crossed the hard-packed, dusty floors of their houses to the doors, to see whether a storm was brewing.

But the stars always shone, and sometimes a yellow moon cast its light over the whole plateau. Then the farmers went back to bed, and when their wives, still half asleep, whispered, "What's the matter?" the men replied, "Nothing, nothing, go back to sleep."

Jeremiah Kentrup was even thinner now than he had been when they first arrived. The sun had bleached his red beard and inscribed a network of tiny lines and folds upon his smiling face. The wrinkles radiated like small stars from the outer corners of his eyes. He held his left shoulder lower than the right; this must have come from the way he walked into the wind.

His mouth had changed most of all. His lips had narrowed from compressing them tightly all the time, and they were almost as pallid as the skin of his face.

"What's the matter?" he asked Joshua Neill, who was working beside him in the potato field. Neill had lowered his hoe and was leaning on the wooden handle, breathing heavily.

Joshua did not answer. He stood stooped forward, his thin chest resting on his hands, which were folded around the hoe. He had pulled his straw hat far down over his forehead. His legs, seeming unusually long and thin in the close-fitting trousers he wore, were spread apart.

"What's the matter, Joshua?" Jeremiah asked again.

"I have to catch my breath."

"You shouldn't work—not for a while, anyway."

Joshua turned his head and gazed fixedly at Jeremiah. His lips were parted, revealing his yellow teeth. His face was damp and large drops of sweat hung from the side of his jaw. His eyes gleamed and the lids quivered.

"You know this won't do any good," he muttered. "You know nothing will come of it. You know that, Jeremiah." His speech was as staccato as his breathing.

"You do not believe, Joshua; you have no faith. That's all that is wrong."

Joshua turned his head away. He stared into the distance and gradually his breathing grew quieter. The sun was already declining, and with each passing minute the shadows of the men grew longer. They fell on the loose earth that was piled in small clumps around the potato vines. Now and then a black beetle darted into a crack in the earth.

Silently, Jeremiah set to work again.

"Wait a minute," Joshua said.

"Let me do it alone, Joshua. I'll finish." Like a machine, his hoe repeated the same movement. With its sharp edge he pulled the earth toward his feet and then broke up the lumps.

"You can't do everything alone," Joshua said. His voice had a malicious undertone.

"You know that I do nothing alone." Jeremiah's face dissolved into a broader smile. "How could I take it upon myself to do all this alone?" He took his hand from the hoe for a moment and described a wide circle. He shifted his weight forward on to the balls of his feet in order to see farther into the distance. The wind brushed his long hair back. Then he lowered his hand and began to work again.

Joshua's bony fingers ran slowly down the handle of his hoe until they came to the spot where the wood was slightly lighter than the rest of the handle. Then he began to cultivate the earth with the same regular movements, though he worked much more slowly than Jeremiah.

The drops of sweat on his chin trickled down on the dry soil and disappeared. With every thrust the hoe slipped in his wet hands, and after a while he realized that he could not go on. There was a haze over his eyes. His throat was tight and he found breathing difficult. He had to cough. Slowly he let himself glide down the handle of the hoe to the ground.

Jeremiah, who was working a little distance away, came striding toward him.

He touched Joshua's back. "What's the matter with you?" he asked. Joshua did not answer. Jeremiah felt the man's thin shoulders through the wet linen of his shirt. They were shaking convulsively from the fit of coughing that had overcome him.

"Joshua, Joshua," he cried anxiously.

"Let me alone," the man murmured.

"I want to help you, Joshua."

"No one can help me any more . . ." The cough interrupted him. "No one, do you hear?" The last words were a choked gasp.

"You must not talk that way. You don't believe what you're saying. You're sick, Joshua. You must rest and get better."

The cough slackened. Joshua Neill sat up. There was an ugly red splotch on the ground.

"It's all no use," he said, so low that Jeremiah had to bend down to hear him. "This is not God's land, this is the devil's land. What the sun does not parch, the wind takes away, and what the wind leaves standing, the locusts will devour. You and I know it, Jeremiah, we know. We've known it for a long time. But the others still think they will reap what they have sown."

He could speak no more. An iron claw gripped his throat, strangling him. Then it passed and he saw Jeremiah's face bending over him, smiling as ever.

"You're sick and weak," Jeremiah said. "You must go up to the

meadow and lie under the cliff, where it's quiet and shady. When you have regained your strength, you will have faith again."

Jeremiah was not sure that this admonition was suitable for a preacher. Should one not believe more fervently in the good when things went ill? He lowered his eyes and said softly, "You must always remember that He will let nothing evil happen."

Joshua got up slowly. He was covered with dust, and he could not stand up straight. His knees knocked. His long arms, with their great, bony hands, hung slackly at his sides. The sleeves of his coat were too short, and his thin wrists showed. They were like carved wood, and covered with a reddish down.

He stared straight ahead and kicked up a little pile of soil with the toes of his wooden sandals.

"Why haven't you told the others?" he asked.

Jeremiah looked up, and the abstracted smile on his face broadened.

"I've known for a long time that you would ask me that," he said. "Some day they will ask me. I must reply to you what I will reply to the others. This is our land. It was given to us by God and He wishes us to cultivate it. He wishes us to struggle. He does not wish us to leave it. And because that is His will, He will not destroy us. He will save us. He will make us great and strong. We'll sow our wheat and it will flourish and ripen and we'll harvest it. But only a few know this. To only a few has it been revealed. Do you understand, Joshua? God does not want everyone to know. Neither the good nor the bad. But I know both."

The wind picked up his last words and whirled them away. Joshua stood unmoving. He kept his eyes closed to conceal his weakness. His lower lip protruded, giving his face a spiteful expression. He shook his head and moved his lips slightly, as though he wanted to reply. Then he brushed his sleeve across his mouth, to wipe away the dried blood. Finally, he took off his hat and used it to knock the dust out of his clothes. Puffs of dust flew up from his trousers, but his shirt remained as dirty as before because powdery earth had mingled with the sweat and hung now in wet blotches to the fibres of the cloth.

"Shall I take you home?" Jeremiah asked.

"No. I'll find my way." He paused. "No, thank you."

"Is there anything I can do for you? You know how I feel."

Joshua shook his head vigorously. "We have everything we need. No, no, we don't need any help."

He bent down slowly and picked up the hoe. Shuffling, he walked down the rows between the young potato plants. He dragged the hoe behind him. When he was a few yards away, he turned around and lifted his big red hand to the brim of his hat.

"Good night, Jeremiah," he murmured.

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and walked on. For a while Jeremiah gazed after him. Then he set to work again. Rhythmically, though perhaps a little faster than before, the hoe moved back and forth.

When he had finished with the part of the potato field that lay on the summit of the hill, his shadow was already so long that it stretched over several rows of vines. The lower the sun sank the more powerful the wind became. Now it bore grains of sand that settled in Jeremiah's hair and often flew into his eyes.

With the hoe over his shoulder, he started down the side of the hill. There was a small path, for the first part of the way, leading through the potato field. The path had been cut by the heavy boots of the men when they went this way every day down to the valley, to the only place in the whole settlement that was actually sheltered. Here they had planted their vegetable gardens in common. Here there was almost no wind and it was always warm. The air smelled of warm earth and was calm and gentle. A few yellow butterflies fluttered over the young cabbages. The humming of bees and wasps over the daisies was like a melancholy song. There were many daisies; they grew in thick clusters along the sides of the field.

The seedling apple trees they had set out stood frail and skeletal in long, straight rows. Most of them had foliage. A few had even flowered in the spring, and the dried blossoms still hung around the dwarfed, abortive fruits.

Women were working the field. They had hopefully planted beans and tomatoes. Their backs were turned to Jeremiah, and as they crouched on the ground, with big straw hats on their heads, they looked like mushrooms. Earlier they had worn kerchiefs, but when the sun grew stronger they had taken to wearing the men's broad-brimmed straw hats. In the end the men had bought new hats from a Californian trader.

The women sang as they worked. It was a song with an endless number of strophes. Their voices were low, as when people hum unconsciously to themselves. Sometimes they called out to one another. Then the melody halted for a moment, but immediately afterward it was taken up again as though there had been no interruption.

When Jeremiah looked away from them, he saw the first locusts. At first he thought he was mistaken; his imagination had often deceived him before this. He stood still, gazing where he had seen something move in the air. It was in the middle of the broad strip of green that lined the way, which they had not ploughed because they intended to use the grass for hay. Besides the daisies, buttercups, yarrow and strawberries grew in the meadow, and here and there a wild rosebush. Now he saw it clearly. This time there were three at once in the air. It was only for the fraction of a second, and the creatures were very tiny. But there was no mistaking them.

Slowly he began climbing up the broad meadow. Beside him his shadow glided silently over the grass. The sun was already low in the sky, but it was still warm, and in this fore-twilight he could see very clearly. The women were still singing. The blades of grass that rubbed against his shoes made a hissing sound, and sometimes there was a sharp snap when his wading feet broke off the head of a flower.

He stood still long before he came to the spot where he had seen the first locusts. There was no need to go on. They were everywhere. Wherever he stopped, they sprang up. They hopped almost straight into the air and then came down again very nearly on the spot from which they had leaped.

Jeremiah bent down and ran his open hand through the grass. It was not hard to catch them, for there were so many. He felt them kicking within his closed fist. Carefully he took up one with the fingers of his other hand. It braced its legs against his thumb. It was very small, but astoundingly strong. He looked closely. It was brownish-green, and on the head were two short antennæ that were stiff and straight as horns. Its horse's face was hard and immobile as it gazed at Jeremiah with wicked eyes.

The women had stopped singing and turned to look at Jeremiah. He noticed this out of the corners of his eyes. He opened his fingers, and with a greap leap the locust fled. Then he opened the fingers of his other hand. In a moment it was empty, and the ticklish sensation of the insects' kicking legs was gone.

Slowly he descended to the path again. His eyes kept gazing down at the hand that had held the locusts. A few brown flecks on the palm was all that remained of them. He rubbed the spots with the fingers of his other hand, and a faint, unpleasant odour came to his nostrils.

The women were standing when he approached them. They gazed steadily at his face and rubbed their hands on their aprons. The sun was in Jeremiah's eyes, and he did not recognize their faces beneath the straw hats until he came up to them.

"God be with you," he said.

They repeated his greeting. They looked at him with their quiet faces, which were tanned and wrinkled. Some had thin lips and a few, the older ones, had lines running down the corners of their mouths.

One of the women was Judith Neill, Joshua's daughter. She was slender and small and fairer than the others. She had large eyes, and there were small yellow dots in the pupils. Her hair was reddish and her forehead clear. And above her nose she had the little fold that they all had.

"What did you see that was so interesting?" Jeanne Colbert asked. She was an older woman, with a long neck and protruding chin. She had never learned to speak English properly.

"Locusts," Jeremiah said unthinkingly.

"I've noticed them for the last few days," Judith said. Her voice was alto, like a young boy's. "There were only a few at first, but now there are a great many of them. They're still very small. They must have just come out of the ground."

"I've heard they devour everything green when they grow up," Helene Stuebner said. She stood with arms akimbo and her body bent slightly forward.

"I've heard, too, that God sends them as punishment for the sins of men." Jeremiah knew without looking that this was Anne Fuller. She sighed rather than spoke.

"Who says that?" he asked.

Annie shrugged her bony shoulders. She had folded her big hands over her belly and tipped her head to one side.

"I don't know, Jeremiah," she replied. "I suppose it's silly talk and I shouldn't have repeated it. I'm sorry."

There was a pause, and the women played with their fingers and shifted their weight from one foot to the other. The sun touched the rim of the horizon. It was very big, but its rays no longer gave any warmth. A gust of cool wind swept along the ground and tugged at the women's skirts.

"Yes, they are locusts," Jeremiah said. "But we will overcome them. This is our land and not theirs. God gave us this soil so that we might till it, not so that they might destroy it."

"Can they do that?" Judith asked.

"What do you think of that?" Helene Stuebner said. "Twenty-two years old and doesn't know a thing about locusts."

"But where have they come from?"

Jeremiah did not know who asked this question. He waited a moment, but when no one answered he said, "From the ground, of course. Sometimes they come from the air too. But here they come out of the ground."

The sun was half gone below the horizon. Like a black crocodile a long cloud was sprawled across its upper rim. The shadows in the garden grew longer and a fresh gust of wind swept through the beans and shook the broad leaves.

"How long have they been lying in the ground?" Anne Fuller asked. She bent down to pick up a knife and a bundle of bast.

"Since last fall," Jeremiah replied.

"And when we came to this country we didn't see them?" Jeanne Colbert asked.

The sun was gone, sucked suddenly down by the dark horizon. The faces of the women became pale and lifeless. The wind that puffed lustily from the summit of the hill seemed to have caught somewhere. It harried the beans that stood in its way. Then it grew quiet again.

The air began to fill with moisture. The movements of the man and the women slowed, and they lowered their voices.

"Would we have taken this land if we had seen them?" Jeanne Colbert asked.

"Isn't this the land for which God has destined us?"

The women fell silent. They took off their hats and ran their hands over their hair. With the sleeves of their aprons they wiped their faces. They placed their tools in baskets, beside clay jugs. Then they set out for home.

Judith Neill and Jeremiah were alone on the last part of the way.

"Your father is very sick," Jeremiah said.

"Very," the girl agreed.

"He must rest."

Judith shook her head. "It's something deeper than that," she said in a half-whisper. For a few yards they walked along silently. Then she asked: "Since when have you known? I mean, about the locusts," she added, when he did not reply immediately.

"Since the day Nancy died. Your father showed me the locust eggs then. Why do you ask?"

"It's because of father. He no longer believes. That is his sickness. He no longer believes in anything—not in you and not in the Holy Scriptures. Not even in God. Nothing. He's terribly sick."

The wind was in their faces now. Jeremiah put his right shoulder forward and lowered his head slightly. The girl walked slowly and evenly, and as though she found pleasure in breasting the wind.

"He thinks you are the devil, Jeremiah," she said, looking into his eyes. "He says you want to destroy us. He says that you crept into our community like a thief in the night and we believed in you. That you've known all along our land here is infested with locusts. He says he saw Satan in your eyes when he showed the eggs to you the day Nancy died."

"That isn't true!" Jeremiah cried. He had to shout to make himself heard above the wind. His eyes were open wide and an expression of horror passed over his face like a dark shadow. But then his old smile returned. "I wish I could help him," he added. "I'm terribly sorry for him."

They said no more until they had reached the summit, where their ways parted.

"What is going to happen?" Judith asked as she bade Jeremiah good-bye.

"We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things and hope to endure all things," he replied. It was from the thirteenth article of faith of Brother Joseph Smith, and Judith bowed her head. She felt Jeremiah's hand touch her hair, and then she was alone. In the twilight she saw his tall, angular figure disappearing.

For some time Jeremiah Kentrup had lived with a young couple, Salomon and Henrietta Hawkins. They had not been married long, and in the evening when they sat in their bare room they held hands and talked little. They had taken in Jeremiah because they wanted to share their happiness with someone. For some months now a child had been on the way, and since then the evenings had become even more silent. Usually they moved their low stools up to the small iron stove for warmth, and then they stared into space and listened to the howling of the wind and the low murmuring of the water on the fire.

On the table behind them stood the kerosene lamp. Its light illuminated nothing but Salomon's big red ears and Henrietta's ash-blond hair. The woman's face was visible only when she bent forward and opened the firebox to lay a fresh stick of wood on the fire. She had rather prominent blue eyes and a full mouth. Her features radiated an inner peace, and when she sat still, her lips slightly parted and her head inclined to one side, she seemed to be listening to voices that spoke to her alone.

When Jeremiah entered, Henrietta and Salomon were sitting at the small round table in the middle of the room.

They had waited with supper and worked around the house. Salomon, whose big hands were best suited to gripping the handles of a plough, had been toiling for weeks on a small cradle. Something always went wrong with his carpentry. He knew just what he wanted, but his joints would not hold or he sawed the wood too short or too long. He had large, gentle brown eyes, and when he stepped back and considered his work his eyes became so sorrowful that Henrietta could not bear it.

"It's wonderful," she said in her deep voice. "I wish I could sleep in it myself. So strong and warm and sheltered."

"Praise be to Jesus Christ," said Jeremiah as he entered.

They repeated his greeting.

Henrietta stood up. She went to the stove in the corner and returned with a big bowl. She had cooked vegetables and potatoes together in a kind of stew. She filled the soup plates in front of the men and they began to eat. Bread that Henrietta had baked lay on the table, and now and then the men cut great slices of it and crumbled it into their soup. The flour for the bread was ground in their coffee grinder. They drank water from an olla, a big clay jug. It was cold; evaporation through the porous clay had cooled it.

They did not talk. The men placed their left arms on the table and the fingers of their right hands closed in a fist around the spoons. Henrietta leaned forward, supporting herself by resting her free arm on her thigh. Her hand brushed gently over her full belly. She listened to the wind shaking the windows, and felt the first movements of the child within her.

When they had emptied their plates, Henrietta cleared away the dishes. She would not wash them until morning.

"The locusts are here," Jeremiah said. He was scarcely speaking, rather thinking aloud. He had not wanted to mention it—at least, not while Henrietta was present. Embarrassed, he cleared his throat.

"Locusts?" she asked, and sat down near the stove beside the men.

Jeremiah nodded. "They have been here all along. Now they've come out of the ground, that's all."

"What will we do?" Salomon asked uncertainly.

"We will destroy them. God has given us this land and we must fight to keep it."

Salomon glanced at Jeremiah. A faint gleam of light that came through the draught opening in the firebox door played over Jeremiah's calm, smiling face. His hands were folded in his lap and the silhouette of his head was outlined sharply against the square of the small window.

Salomon sensed the calm strength that radiated from the man. In the darkness he felt for his wife's hand, and when he had found it he pressed it gently and said softly, "Amen."

Jeremiah arose before daybreak. The room where he slept was a small partitioned space with a narrow window. By stretching out both arms he could touch the opposite walls.

The window would not close tightly, and small gusts of the big wind puffed continually into the room. Outside it was still pitch dark. The glass pane was filmed with moisture. Jeremiah ran his hand over it and tried to see out. Far down on the horizon he could make out a twinkling star. Its light gleamed and flickered oddly through the wet window.

Jeremiah dried his hand on the hem of his shirt. Then he dressed. On tiptoe he walked through the living-room. He heard the quiet breathing of Salomon and Henrietta, whose bed was close by the stove. Quietly he opened the unlocked door. The wind pressed in upon him, and the hinges creaked as they turned.

Outside, he shivered with cold. The faint glow of dawn was already in the sky. The wind had slackened, but the air was still filled with the distant rustling of the trees on the hilltops, with the faint hiss of the grass along the roadway and with the trickling sound of falling sand and leaves.

Jeremiah let himself be pushed up the hill. He was glad to have the wind at his back. He leaned his shoulders against it, and his feet were always a little ahead of his body. His hair flew into his face, and he felt the steady pressure behind him lifting his hands.

When he came to the top, it was already light enough for him to make out a few scattered huts. The sky grew brighter, and the pointed roofs stood out more sharply. The unplanned boards of the walls were still

damp and dark. In spite of the wind, there was a profound silence now, broken only by the crowing of a cock in the valley below him.

From one window came the glow of a lamp. Perhaps they were praying, or breakfasting, or someone was ill. A shadow scurried past the window. Then the light went out and the window became black once more, as though night were crouching behind it.

Jeremiah began to descend the meadow, which extended as far as the Neills' covered wagon. When he bent down he saw that locusts clung to every stalk of grass. They seemed to be still asleep. The dew lay in a fine film on their bodies. When he picked one up, a little puddle formed in the palm of his hand. The water on the grass was cold and clear, and Jeremiah felt it through his trousers above his ankles.

The locust he held in his palm moved. Apparently, the warmth of his hand had awakened it. When he breathed on it, it lifted its long legs as though to stretch. Then it sat quietly, and gradually the dew evaporated from its body.

Jeremiah carried it in his outstretched hand while he descended the meadow. The valley was misty and he could not see very far. A flush appeared on the horizon and the wind grew weaker.

The farther down in the valley he went the more quiet it became. The rustle of the trees on the hilltops had ceased long before, and the sound of falling leaves and sand was no longer to be heard. His own footsteps in the grass alone broke the silence, though when he stood still he could hear the breathing of the meadow.

Jeremiah started. The locust had taken a great leap. For a moment he saw it in the air and then it vanished into the grass. He walked on for a few steps without realizing that he still held his hand outstretched before him. Then he let his arm drop.

He came to a small basalt rock and sat down. The rock was damp and the moss that grew on it felt like a water-soaked sponge.

Jeremiah bent down. He tried to look beneath the grass, found he could not from his seat and went to his knees. He rested his forearms on the wet ground and bent low, so that he could look sidewise into the meadow.

Before his eyes was a dense forest of quaking grass and dandelion, daisies and harebells, clover and snapdragon. The flowers were webbed with shining silvery dewdrops, and on their stems clung the locusts, like repulsive, greenish-brown sores. All their heads hung down. They sat beside and upon one another. Many of them were already big and fat, but most were still small and delicate, though they already possessed the full equipment they needed to destroy Jeremiah's work. All they lacked was wings. But perhaps this was a wingless species that could only crawl—crawl and eat.

Although they still slept, when he bent the grass stems aside they

seemed to stare at him with their wicked eyes. Their wide mandibles were closed, and their strong posterior legs stretched out slackly. With their other legs they clung to the plants, or to the heads and bodies of their fellows.

Jeremiah felt the blood pounding in his ears. But he could not tear himself away from the sight. He laid his head on the ground and brushed his right arm through the grass, bending it aside to make a path for his view. He felt the dew soak to his skin and saw the locusts fall to the ground like lifeless pebbles. He could now see an arm's length farther into the grass. There the dandelion sprang on a slender stalk from out of jagged leaves that slumped on the ground. Beside it stood the harebells, bearing their blue flowers on delicate stems. And beyond them the bluish-green pedicels of the daisies. But the locusts were everywhere.

As Jeremiah got up, the sun rose above the horizon. Its first weak rays bathed the meadow in light. A few minutes later, when it had risen a little higher, the grass began to dry and the dewdrops rose like a fine mist into the air.

Jeremiah knew that now the locusts would begin to stretch their legs. First those on the tops of the grass and the flowers would feel the warmth. With stiff legs they would turn their bodies over and crawl to the upper surface. Perhaps they would sit down on the flowers in the centre of the dandelions and daisies, and on the waving bells of the harebells.

By the time those lower down came up, the first locusts would already be dry and they would begin to feed.

Jeremiah walked with lowered head until he came to Joshua Neill's wagon. Smoke was rising from the small chimney pipe. The canvas that served as a door was drawn back, and in the semi-darkness Jeremiah could make out faces sitting in a half-circle around an overturned box. The big bowls they held in their hands gleamed white, and he saw the sliced side of a loaf of bread that lay on the box before them.

They seemed to be eating in silence, for Jeremiah heard no sound, although he was already quite close.

"God bless you and yours, Joshua," he said, and stepped up to the wagon.

"God bless you, Jeremiah," they replied in their slow, solemn manner.

"Cannot Jeremiah enter and breakfast with us?" Judith asked.

"Come in," Joshua said. His voice was hoarse. He held both his big hands around the bowl, as if he wanted to warm them. As he chewed his jaw made careful, grinding movements that sometimes distorted his entire face.

His wives, Rosy and Helen, sat leaning forward and dipping pieces of bread into their bowls, which stood on the box. Then they put the softened bread into their mouths, holding their heads a little to the side so that their teeth were visible. The two women looked alike: they were

tall and sturdy and had faces that were all plane surfaces. Their good-natured, rather stupid eyes were set into their faces oddly far from their small, upturned noses. The only real difference between them was that Rosy was blonde and blue-eyed, while Helen was as dark as an Indian woman.

Jeremiah climbed the ladder that was leaning against the wagon and sat down on a box that Judith pushed toward him. She handed him a bowl of warm goat's milk, and Joshua cut a slice of bread for him. Jeremiah dipped the bread into the milk, as the women were doing, and for a while no one spoke.

"A beautiful day," Judith said finally in a low voice.

Everyone looked out on the sunlit meadow. The daisies, which grew in thick clusters, shone as big splashes of white, while the other flowers were scattered in small dots of colour over the whole hillside. The pale shimmer of the dewdrops in the grass had vanished. Once more the grass was a summery green, and when the light breeze shook it, it broke and refracted the rays of the sun.

"Look here, Joshua," Jeremiah said finally, "I have not come here to eat your bread. I've come because I am worried about you."

"About me?" Joshua asked.

"Sometimes something comes over people and they don't know what it is. They begin to doubt everything. At first it's a vague feeling within them. But gradually it grows stronger. Finally it fills them, it leaves room for nothing else. Then they begin to look for reasons for their doubts. And they find reasons because they want to find them. And then these doubts give rise to new doubts, and after the reasons they find new reasons, even deeper reasons. And so it goes on until they doubt God and doubt themselves. And then, Joshua, they are finished."

The wagon was warm and still, and his words seemed to hover in the air for a while before they dissolved. The women had folded their hands in their laps and lowered their eyes. Joshua tapped steadily with the middle finger of his right hand; the sound was like the gnawing of a woodworm.

Jeremiah looked at them all, one after the other. Only Judith returned his glance. She had withdrawn her head a little into her neck, and she seemed to be still listening to the words long after they were spoken.

Joshua stood up. As he pushed back his chair, there was a scraping sound. He could not stand straight, because the roof of the wagon was too low. And so he stood leaning forward, and as he spoke he bent his head closer and closer to Jeremiah's.

"Now listen to me, Jeremiah," he said in his hoarse voice. "I think you're confusing faith with stupidity. And we were stupid when we followed you up here. You told us this was the land the Lord had destined for us. It came to you in a dream! Why you? Why not me?"

Maybe you were mistaken, Jeremiah. Maybe it only looked something like this, the land that the Lord showed you. Maybe it was a few hundred miles farther south, where there are no locusts and the wind doesn't blow forever. Or maybe you didn't dream it at all. Maybe you figured it all out very slyly and cleverly, and put two and two together . . ."

"Joshua!" Jeremiah sprang up and seized the man by the shoulders. He shook him as if he wanted to awaken him from a dream. Then he let his arms sink slowly. The old smile returned to his face.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "I should have remembered that you are an old man, and sick. Forgive me, Joshua."

Joshua stood with his arms hanging at his sides. He was panting, and swaying slightly.

"Go," he whispered hoarsely.

Jeremiah looked at the others. The women were staring at the floor. Judith held her hands over her eyes, and Jeremiah saw nothing of her but her red hair.

He noticed that drops of sweat were running slowly down the bridge of his nose. He rubbed his sleeve over his face. Then he shook his head. For a moment he stood, as though he wanted to say something else; then he turned slowly and went to the door. Heavily he descended the creaking little ladder. As soon as he stepped away from the wagon, he had the feeling that it had all been a horrible dream.

He turned again. In the shadow of the canvas roof he saw the pale faces of the people within, immobile, as though they were not of flesh and blood.

Then he knew it was reality.

From far away Jeremiah saw a group of men standing on the hilltop. They were waiting for him. Like shadow pictures their figures stood out against the bright sky. He recognized the men. The tall one in the middle was Colbert. He was an austere, elderly man who had come among them only a few years before. He never spoke of his earlier life, and no one had ever asked him. He was a hard worker, and extremely strong. He leaned back as he walked, and year in year out he wore enormous wooden shoes on his bare feet. They clattered noisily when he trod on the dry earth.

Beside him was Stuebner. He had a formless face with small, restless black eyes. His skin was sallow, and his fingers were always playing with something. When he prayed, he was frequently overcome by a kind of fit. He would stutter disconnected words or phrases, a convulsion would shake his whole body, and when he came to himself hours later he would have no memory of what had happened.

Jeremiah could see clearly that Stuebner was talking animatedly to Fuller, who stood in front of him, big and portly. Stuebner had taken

hold of a button of his jacket, as he always did when he had something important to say. Fuller listened unmoved. Jeremiah could not make out their faces, but he knew well how they would look. Fuller would blink mockingly and his broad, ruddy face, which was always covered with a stubble of yellow whiskers, would shine like a full moon. He would radiate so much calm and composure that excited little Stuebner would finally lose the thread of his discourse.

Other men of the settlement were standing around these three. They were all wearing hats, and most of them had their hands in their pockets.

They fell silent long before Jeremiah reached them. The air hung warm and sleepy over the nettles and blackberry bushes that grew along the sides of the road. Last year's withered foliage lay in small heaps here and there, wherever the wind had piled it. It was greyish-brown and had already begun to form layers. It no longer crackled underfoot, but was springy like the soil in forests. A few locusts had settled on the leaves to sun themselves. When Jeremiah's shadow passed over them they hopped out on to the road and then into the furrows of the potato fields.

Jeremiah shook hands with each of the men in turn. They were pleased to see him; they were glad there was the familiar smile on his face. He did not look as though a plague had visited them.

"You're waiting for me because of the locusts?" His voice sounded composed, almost casual.

"The women told us about it," Colbert said.

"Well, the locusts are here. What of it? Are we not here also?"

He looked around the circle for a moment. The men did not speak. He could look into the eyes of most of them. But Stuebner stared at the ground.

"And is not God here also?" he went on. "And is not this the land He has given us? Shall we allow ourselves to be driven from our land by vermin? Shall we allow our faith to be gnawed away by them, before they have even begun to devour our wheat?"

"They are said to be a punishment of God," Stuebner stammered. "Who can defend himself against a scourge of God?"

"A punishment?" Jeremiah asked. "Have we sinned? Have we not lived His Word and His Law by day and night? Perhaps it is a test. Perhaps He wishes us to show that we are worthy of His bounty. That we are strong enough to keep this land He has revealed to us, and to build of it a future for ourselves, and our children and for all the others who will come after us."

"I'm an old farmer," Colbert said. His words were like stones tumbling heavily into an abyss. "I've trampled more locusts under my bare feet than all of you put together. I've crushed them between these fingers of mine until the juice ran over my wrists. It's no good."

He shook his head slowly. "If God does not have mercy . . ."

"So you would like to sit still and wait for help from above?" Fuller asked. His face was broad and friendly as his voice. "You would like to go to bed, pull your nightcap over your ears and hope for a miracle."

"Fall not into sin," Stuebner warned.

Fuller began to laugh. It was a warm, good-natured laugh. "I'd almost forgotten about you," he said. "I shouldn't let my tongue go this way. I'm asked to believe that the Lord wants to destroy us because there are a few locusts on our soil. I'm asked to believe that this cannot be the land He promised us. And I'm asked not to feel any longer that this soil belongs to me, that this sun is meant to make my potatoes grow. You want me to hitch up my oxen and go looking for a new claim. A farmer on wheels . . ." Again he laughed, a broad, self-satisfied laugh. He laughed so hard his eyes filled with tears. "A travelling farmer . . ."

Stuebner stood as though the words were not directed at him. But some of Fuller's merriment began to reflect in the faces of the others. They straightened up. Some of them pushed their hats to the back of their necks, and others shifted their weight from one foot to the other. A gust of wind made breathing easier, and for a moment their eyes surveyed this broad land upon which the sun shone—the land that belonged to them.

Jeremiah began to speak. His voice was low and emphatic, and they had to gather close around him to understand what he was saying.

"What we plan will demand heavy sacrifices," he said. "I see a winter before us that will be even harder than the past winter. There will be no flour in the sacks, and there will not be enough feed to keep all the animals. But we will survive it. I know it. Do you understand? I don't say, I believe it. I say, I know it. I see it. Here, out of this land, this soil, these fields, will grow the wonder, the miracle God has promised us. We must not disappoint Him, as He will not disappoint us if only we believe. I know how hard it is for you and how easy for me. You can believe only what I say and what you see. But I—I know it. Yes, I know it——"

He stopped suddenly. Bowed, almost crawling, the gaunt figure of Joshua came up the meadow. Like a drunkard, he stumbled with every step. Again and again his hands reached into the grass as though seeking support there. He fell to his knees, but hauled himself erect again. He faltered and wandered to one side. Once more he fell and lay in the grass.

"Joshua!" Jeremiah bellowed with all the power of his lungs. With a single spring he crossed the ditch of the road and began to run down the hill. The others followed him.

Joshua had got up again. It was as if his joints had lost all their strength, as though he had broken up into small pieces. He reached out for a thick clump of yarrow. He tried to draw himself up to his full height. His knees stretched. He lifted his head so that the sun flooded

momentarily across his face. He opened his mouth as though he were about to speak. The yarrow tore. For a second he stood upright, arms stretched out before him like a blind man. In his hands he held the white blossoms. His head pitched back, his knees gave way, and before Jeremiah could catch him he fell back.

As Jeremiah knelt beside him, a stream of rust-red blood gushed from Joshua's mouth. It ran over his sunken cheeks and trickled down into the grass of the meadow.

The men gingerly picked him up and carried him to his wagon. Their feet crushed the grass and the flowers in two parallel lines, and behind them it looked as if a narrow-wheeled cart had been driven across the meadow. Sometimes they felt themselves trampling locusts underfoot.

When they laid Joshua Neill down beside his wagon, they discovered he was dead.

They uncovered their heads.

Jeremiah found Judith in the vegetable garden where she had been the evening before.

When the women heard him coming, they stopped weeding. He walked slowly, with bowed head. His shadow glided before him. His boots made a grinding sound as they broke through the crust of dry earth that covered the field. The air was hot and sultry, and the women's aprons had dark spots, where perspiration had dampened them.

The women gazed at him. They squinted, because the sun dazzled them.

"Judith," Jeremiah said without looking at her, "your father is sick."

"What?"

The women turned their heads slowly and looked at the girl. Her mouth was slightly open and her eyes gazed steadily at Jeremiah.

"Very sick," Jeremiah repeated heavily.

Anne Fuller, who sat beside her on the ground, took her hand. Judith bowed her head when she felt the touch of the earth-covered fingers. "Is it bad?" she asked.

Jeremiah stepped closer to her. His shadow fell upon her. A fat black beetle crawled over her apron. It was so still that they could hear the scratching sound of its feet on the cloth.

"Is he dead?" Judith asked.

Jeremiah knelt on the ground beside the girl. He felt the women looking at him.

"I will help you if I can, Judith," he said.

When Jeremiah came home after the burial of Joshua, it was still broad daylight. He rarely saw Henrietta by day. She sat at the window on a chair that Salomon had made for her. It was slightly warped, but she liked having a back to lean against. She held some sewing in her

hand, a tiny shirt with long sleeves that ended in narrow cuffs. Her feet rested on a box.

A ray of yellow sunlight came diagonally through the window and drew a distorted image of the window frame upon the hard-packed floor. The billions of dust motes that danced in the sunlight looked like the rays of northern lights. A cat put out her paw and swatted the dangling ends of Henrietta's apron. She watched as the apron fluttered slowly back and forth. After a while she began licking her paws, and finally she sat still, blinking up at Henrietta.

"Sit down over here," Henrietta said, after greeting Jeremiah.

Jeremiah took a box from a corner and placed it in the shadow beside Henrietta's chair. He sat down, propping his head in his hands. Then he ran his tongue over his dry lips and closed his eyes.

"Do you want something to drink?" Henrietta asked.

He shook his head. "I just want to rest. I want to rest for a long while."

"Why not lie down and take a nap?"

"I'd rather sit here with you."

The evening wind began rattling the windows. The cat got up. She stretched out one forepaw as far as she could and touched the ground experimentally. Then she walked slowly and silently to Jeremiah. She sat down in front of him and looked at him with her blinking eyes. Now and then she snapped at a fly.

When she saw that Jeremiah would pay no attention to her, she lay down, turned on her side and went to sleep.

After a while Henrietta looked up at Jeremiah. She saw that he was smiling again.

"You're industrious, Henrietta," he said.

"You know that I must be, if the baby is not to lie naked in his cradle."

"I must have looked very bad when I came in here before," Jeremiah said, after a brief pause. "Wasn't my whole face distorted?"

"You were sad."

"I was stupid, Henrietta, just very stupid. I suddenly felt all alone. At the grave they stood around me like a silent wall. There was an abyss between us. They didn't look at me. They chewed their lips and gazed down at the grave. Helen and Rosy did not shake hands with me, and Judith only when no one was looking. Stuebner took their arms and led them home. As we closed the grave, I, too, no longer looked up. I stared at the earth. I know just how it looks now. On top it's fine and very dark. And underneath it's a dark tan and just as fine, and there are no pebbles or grains of sand in it as there are elsewhere. This is God's land. But for a moment I forgot it. That is how stupid I was, how terribly stupid."

Henrietta let her sewing lie in her lap. She stared straight ahead, not

knowing what to say. She had to warn Jeremiah. She knew that Stuebner was going from house to house and dropping mysterious hints about the cause of Joshua's death. She knew he was babbling that a great plague would descend upon them, and that if they wanted to save themselves they must eliminate the sinful among them. "Trample them underfoot as one does a snake," he had said.

"You have enemies, Jeremiah," she said.

"I have many enemies." He nodded. "And it's my fault that I have them. You see, life is so easy and wonderful for me. I know that my way is the right one. I am never alone, and when I need His aid I hear His voice speaking to me as clearly as I hear yours now. But the others? I alone speak to them, I, a man like themselves. I can make myself understood only through words, and I am too weak and too unskilled to do that properly. I am like a teacher who knows what he should explain to the children and who stammers when they ask their searching questions. Finally, he can no longer answer them and can say only: Trust in me. I know."

The sun disappeared from the window, but it seemed to Henrietta that its reflection still shone upon Jeremiah's face. He had taken the cat in his big hands and was stroking her gently. The cat drew in her head, closed her eyes and began to purr.

"To-morrow I will make my rounds over all the land," he said. "I'll see how things stand with each part of it. The locusts can't be strong everywhere. Probably they're weaker in the fields we ploughed last fall. Then I'll make a plan. And then the struggle will begin. Much of the grain we'll have to cut and burn, and many meadows must be mowed and the hay burned up with the insects. But parts of it we'll save. And then, next winter, we will simply stand closer together and tighten our belts a little more. But they will not destroy us, never."

At dusk Salomon came home.

"Things look bad in the community," he said. "They're whispering and gossiping everywhere. Wherever I went I found small groups talking, and they shut up as soon as I came near. And wherever I went I stumbled over Stuebner. Helen and Rosy are sitting in their wagon and telling frightful stories."

"What about Judith?" Jeremiah asked.

Salomon shrugged. "I didn't meet her," he said. "She wasn't in the wagon with the others. But it's time you did something, Jeremiah. High time."

Next morning, when Jeremiah descended into the valley, he met no one.

He let the wind carry him over the brow of the hill. When he came to the pine trees, he left the path. The trees stood close together and there

was a smell of warmth and resin. In the small clearing heather grew. The pine needles formed a smooth floor, and Jeremiah had to walk carefully as he descended, in order not to slip. Now and then he brushed a spider's thread from his face, and when he walked among the blackberry bushes he freed his trousers from the thorns carefully, so as not to tear them.

When he passed beyond the uncleared land he saw in the distance the small house that Colbert had built. It was better made than most of the others; there was a tall thatched roof that reached almost down to the windows. All day long the sun shone into the windows. Some day, when the fruit trees in front were grown, the house would be hidden in the shade until you were right upon it.

The children on the doorstep stood up when they saw Jeremiah crossing the brook toward them. One of them went inside. The others leaned against the wall and continued munching the big slices of bread they held in their hands. They watched Jeremiah slowly approaching, and chewed their bread, and rubbed their heads against the warm wood of the house.

When he came up to them, they held out their hands and greeted him. Their eyes were bright and their gaze direct.

Julie came to the door with the other children. Julie was a daughter of Colbert's older brother, a stunted girl with watery eyes and an over-large head. She could not talk properly and had to force every word with a painful effort.

She wiped her hand on her apron before she extended it to Jeremiah. She opened her mouth to speak, and Jeremiah looked at her with his gentle smile and waited.

"She wants to say that no one is home," one of the children said. The girl nodded. Then she again opened her mouth and finally produced hoarse, incomprehensible sounds.

"They're all in the field, she wants to say."

"Of course, they're all in the field and won't be home till evening. That's right, isn't it, Julie?"

Again the girl nodded. Her eyes looked questioningly at Jeremiah. She turned and pointed to the door.

"She wants to ask if you won't come in," the child interpreted.

"No, thank you," Jeremiah said. "I have no time, I just dropped in because I was in the neighbourhood."

Julie folded her hands over her breast. She gazed at Jeremiah out of watery eyes and again her lips formed sounds.

"She'd like to pray with you," the child said.

"What would you like to pray for?"

The girl pointed to a small tree that stood with drooping leaves in the centre of a circle of cultivated earth.

"For the tree," the child said. "But papa told her we don't pray for trees as long as there are people to pray for."

Jeremiah folded his hands. He turned his face up, so that the sun shone upon it and his beard flamed. When the children saw that he really intended to pray, they, too, folded their hands.

"Great God who art in Heaven," Jeremiah began, "behold Thy servant, Jeremiah, and Thy maid, Julie, and Thy child, Marie, and Thine other child, Marthe, and Thy third child, Louis, and Thy smallest child Michel, and behold Thy poor, sick cherry tree, and have mercy upon it and let its roots grow sound and its leaves green and full of sap. And let it grow tall and strong and bear fruit, and guard it against all dangers, against the frost and the blight and . . ." Jeremiah paused.

"And the locusts," a child said.

"Amen," said Jeremiah.

"Amen," they said.

Jeremiah examined the land around Colbert's house very carefully.

All the meadows looked the same. Beyond doubt the locusts had already grown. They were eating. When Jeremiah lay on the ground, he could see how they gnawed at the young stems. The movement of their mandibles was scarcely perceptible, but they consumed tender leaves in a few minutes. Tough plants they spared for the present. The grand feast had not yet begun. In many places there were only a few of them, in others they were crowded one upon the other. Each one behaved as though it was alone in the world. They climbed over the bodies of their fellows, stepped on each other's heads, entangled their legs and tumbled to the ground, freed themselves of the embrace as though nothing had happened and began anew somewhere else their odious game.

On the north side of the hill there were only a few of them, and these were quite small. After Jeremiah had observed them for a while, he felt certain that all those that crawled out of the ground here worked their way along the hill to the sunny side. This whole meadow would be saved. However, there was not much they could harvest there. The greater part of it was velvet grass, which the cattle would not touch. There was also a kind of reed grass with brittle fibres that cut the fingers when you tried to break it. As everywhere else, dandelions grew here, and there were many of the big, grey-green leaves of the cowslips. The flowers were withered and hung in small brown bunches to the stems; only in a few isolated spots a tiny yellow petal gleamed shyly.

With the stub of a pencil Jeremiah made a note in a small notebook. Two cows. He was about to replace it in his pocket, then hesitated, and

opened it again. He moistened the pencil with his lips and changed the 2 to a 3.

He went into the fields of young wheat. They stretched across a broad plain at the foot of the hill. The green stalks reached up to his knees. The stand was so thick now that he could scarcely see the earth between the rows. There were locusts only at the edges which bordered on the meadows. The farther he went toward the centre, the less he found.

He breathed easier. There would be bread, at least. Bread for all. It would be necessary only to sacrifice the meadows. They would cut the grass and let it dry. And in the morning, when the locusts were still stiff from their night in the hay, the men would make a great fire and pitch hay and locusts into the flames.

He went on to the vegetable garden, where the women were working. He greeted them with his friendly smile. They sat still with immobile faces and suspiciously watched his movements. They observed how he stretched out on the ground, how he pushed the leaves aside with his big red hands. They saw him go deeper into the field. Now and again they saw his red hair appear and disappear among the green vines of the beans. Finally he came back. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his coat. Then he took out his notebook and made an entry.

"No vegetables on the River Creek side. No beans, no tomatoes, maybe some cabbage."

He replaced the notebook in his pocket.

Some of the men were working in the potato patch. The only one who extended his hand to Jeremiah was Fuller.

"How is it?" Jeremiah asked.

"Hot," Fuller said, and laughed benignly.

"I mean about the locusts."

"Haven't seen any in the potatoes yet."

Jeremiah looked over the small field. They had not had enough seed potatoes to plant more. They had chosen the sandiest and poorest soil, and the windiest place. Perhaps this impoverished patch of land would be all they could save if they failed with the wheat. He tried to estimate the crop. Perhaps this soil would yield eighty bushels per acre, maybe ninety. What they harvested from the fifteen acres would be too much to let them starve and not enough for them to live.

Toward evening, when Jeremiah climbed the hill again from the other side, he had two pages of notes in his little book. He walked heavily and stones rolled down the hill behind him. The wind hummed through the trees and often the iron cleats he had nailed to his heels rang out loud and hard.

When he came to the top, he turned around. The crescent moon, which had risen long before, was brighter and the valley below was

veiled in thin mist. A partridge flew up from the grass and a mole scampered into his dwelling. The huckleberry bushes laden with green-and blue-tinted white flowers, trembled in the wind, and the colour of the small rocks that projected above the heather was swallowed by blackness.

Jeremiah stretched out his arms. He raised himself on tiptoe.

"Yes, yes!" he said.

Then he walked on. From the window of Salomon's hut shone a soft yellow light.

It was night.

Jeremiah had tried to call the settlers to a meeting during the week. They had shaken their heads and refused. There was too much work in the fields, they said, and in the evenings they were too tired. Their eyes looked through him when he spoke of fighting the locusts.

"Yes," they had replied, "it's bad that this plague has come upon us."

Then they had put their hands in their pockets, shrugged their shoulders and spoke of other matters.

Again and again Jeremiah urged them. He knew that every day was precious. The insects were growing bigger and the muscles of their mandibles were stronger. The tender leaves in the meadows were destroyed as fast as they grew, and it was only a question of time before the locusts would devour the tougher grasses as well. The yellow-green tips of the beans had long ago disappeared, and the tomatoes looked like young pine trees in the forest whose fresh shoots have been eaten off by deer. The locusts had wandered as far as the edge of the woods, and not even the huckleberry leaves were safe from them.

But the farmers said no. They behaved as though nothing had happened. As always, they went to their work by twos and threes. They trotted along the dusty path with lowered heads, behind the teams of oxen, and from a distance nothing could be seen of them but the big round straw hats that bobbed over the wheatfields to the rhythm of their tread.

When the path became too dusty, they walked in the grass at the side of the road. A layer of grey dust had sifted down upon it, but even here the locusts crawled. They resembled their surroundings, though the farmers might easily have seen them had they wanted to. But they gazed straight ahead, looking up only when Stuebner bobbed up at their sides. Then they answered his question in low tones.

Yes, it was all right with them if there was a meeting on Sunday, after church. They would come. And they would speak their piece, all right. But they didn't see much sense in it. If it pleased God, He would destroy the plague. Yes, yes—maybe He would do it sooner if they turned away from a false prophet. Maybe.

Jeremiah was glad when he heard that on Sunday he would at last have an opportunity to speak to the settlers. Glad even though Stuebner had arranged the meeting. He would tell them his plan.

Jeremiah sat alone under a tree, with a small bowl of vegetable stew that Henrietta had cooked for him. It was a lukewarm mixture of carrots, potatoes and peas. He leaned his back against the tree trunk and stretched out his legs as he ate. Through his jeans he felt the warmth of the soil.

The ground under the tree was almost bare. There were some scattered snapdragons, standing tall among sparse blades of grass, and the roots of the trees projected aboveground. The everlasting wind had uncovered them. They looked grey and gristly, like iron tongs by which the tree clung to the ground.

When a locust came near Jeremiah, he stepped on it. He would lift his knee and scrape his heavy boot over it until it was crushed to a dark cloth that lay in the sun among the bright grains of sand.

Jeremiah already knew what he would say on Sunday. He had worked out a precise plan. As far as possible, he had distributed the sacrifices that would have to be made, so that they fell equally on all shoulders. He would be able to preserve a little for all of them.

The cows would have to go; but if it was at all possible they must keep the oxen. It would be wisest to sell the cattle before they starved to death. They should be able to feed a few goats over the winter. Goats ate less, and they would give milk for the children, at least. All would have to do without most vegetables, and there would be barely bread enough to last out the winter. Potatoes would probably last three months. Most of them must be saved for next year's seed.

But all this was possible providing they destroyed the locusts. If not, nothing would remain. Or would God perform a miracle? No, no—miracles did not come to those who waited passively for them. Nothing was accomplished by prayers alone. It was not sufficient that they were poor and unfortunate. Miracles must be fought for. Only to the worthy would God send His gulls, as he had done for their brothers at Salt Lake. Only to the worthy.

It was hot in the Colberts' parlour, and the air was stale with the breath of the men and women who had assembled for services. They had not been able to build a church yet. God would have them live first, before they built a temple to Him; first must come a roof over their heads and a stall for the cow and food for the children. And digging wells, and constructing troughs for the oxen to drink, and irrigation ditches to lead the water from the brook into the fields.

Through the window-pane the sun shone brightly. The men near the windows felt the warmth on their shoulders. They were uncomfortable

in their dark coats. Many of them rested their heads in their hands; others shifted their weight from one foot to the other, and the boards of the floor creaked softly under them.

From time to time a breath of air came through the open door. Jeremiah, who stood in the middle of the room, felt it pass across his forehead like a cooling hand. He preached. He spoke whatever came to his mind. This was right and proper. It was the law of the Mormons. But never before had he heard so clearly inside himself the words he had to speak. He merely had to translate into the sounds of human speech the Word that God gave him. It was so easy, so wonderfully easy, when He stood at his side.

Jeremiah smiled. His voice was strong, and its deep tone had a persuasive power. His eyes roamed among his listeners. Yes—he knew them all and he knew what their eyes looked like, even though they did not face him squarely. He knew the wrinkles in their faces and the white hair on their temples and in their beards; he knew their thin necks and their stooped figures, their baggy pants and their heavy, dusty shoes. He knew what was going on inside them. Knew that they doubted him; that they spoke with their wives, softly, so that the children would not hear; that when they met each other in the fields they conversed in whispers and fell suddenly silent when he approached. He could talk, they grumbled inwardly—that was easy.

“Come closer to me,” Jeremiah said. “Come very close, so that you can see me properly. From where you are I must seem like a shadow to you and you cannot see what goes on within me.”

The women folded their hands tighter. Jeremiah saw the skin over the knuckles whiten and their wrinkled, broken-nailed fingers bend.

“Even when you lower your eyelids,” he said, “I know what is in your gaze.”

A wasp began buzzing against the window. When Jeremiah paused for a moment, it was the only sound to be heard in the room.

Jeremiah raised his head and looked over the heads of the people. “A barrier of doubt has come between you and me,” he said softly. “With my bare hands I cannot tear it down and with my poor words I cannot persuade you to raze it. But I know one thing, and may you know it as I know it. This work will go on, and God’s will be done, whether or not you doubt me. Alone I will complete what He commands, whether or not you understand it. Whether you will or not, He will help you, out of His infinite goodness, and even though you curse me, it will be through me that the salvation will come to you.

“Everything is good, brethren and sisters, everything is good.”

“Everything is good,” the men and women murmured. These were the old words of the Mormons, the ancient, magical phrase that gave them renewed strength when they faltered.

The women left the room. Judith and Henrietta alone shook hands with Jeremiah.

He was still standing on the spot where he had ended his sermon when he heard Colbert's voice. The words were spoken slowly and hoarsely, and their echo seemed to linger in the hot air for a long time.

"Since when have you known about the locusts, Jeremiah?" he asked.

"Since the day of Nancy's death."

"And why didn't you tell us?"

"Wouldn't you have run away? Wouldn't you have abandoned the promised land? Could you have endured the knowledge then, when winter was at our door? When Nancy had just died? No, no—I couldn't tell you. God did not want it."

"We don't want to judge you, Jeremiah," Fuller said. Even to-day, Sunday, his face was ragged with stubble. He sat portly and comfortable in his chair. He had propped his right elbow on his thigh and put his left hand to his hip. "Don't misunderstand us. But we aren't children, Jeremiah. I think we've all lived through a good deal. We would have faced it, I think. Most likely we would have said, 'Good, Jeremiah, if you tell us this is the promised land, we will stay. If you say God will perform a miracle and rid us of the locusts, we believe you.' But you did not speak, Jeremiah."

"Because God commanded me to be silent. He commanded me to bear the responsibility alone. I alone was to know. You were to walk blindly over the fields. He wanted you to trample the locust eggs underfoot and not to know what they were. He wanted you to sleep peacefully at night and think that all was well. Only one of us was to worry, only one of us was to torment himself brooding about it every night."

"He lies." Stuebner's voice came from a corner of the room. The farmers slowly turned their heads. Those who sat in front of Jeremiah shifted aside, so that Jeremiah could see Stuebner.

Stuebner twisted his round black hat between his fingers. He had leaned his head against the wall and his eyes were half shut. His feet were drawn up against the box and his knees were pressed tightly together.

"He lies," he repeated.

The men waited tensely.

They sat with their heavy bodies stooped forward, and the smaller men who stood along the walls raised themselves on tiptoe. The wasp still buzzed against the window-pane.

Jeremiah turned his calm, smiling face toward Stuebner.

"Go on," he said.

"He never saw this land, never. It was never promised to him. He never heard God's voice. Long ago the Lord cursed him and cast him out. He is the Devil Incarnate. He doesn't want to create a paradise for

us, he wants to destroy us—us and our wives and children. Maybe he wants to buy our land himself, after he's driven us to the poorhouse. Maybe he wants to fatten on our dead bodies. He wants to build himself an empire out of our misery. And maybe our kids, if they don't starve to death, will work as slaves on his land."

Stuebner raised his hand shakily to his sweating brow. He lifted his eyes. Like glowing fireflies they darted around the room.

Jeremiah stood unmoving. His long arms dangled at his sides. His palms were turned outward and his fingers slightly crooked.

"Is that all you have to say?" he asked, and his voice was gentle and friendly.

"All? Is that all?" Stuebner shouted, standing up. He pressed his fists against his chest. His elbows stood out at his sides and he bent his whole body so far forward that he had to take a short step to avoid falling.

"No, that ain't all," he panted in a hoarse whisper. "That ain't all. Far from it. Do you want me to tell that you're a murderer? Should Rosy and Helen come here and tell how you murdered Joshua because he was in your way? How you took this weak old man, sick to death, in your big hands and squeezed his throat until he gasped for air. How you ran away so as not to be present at Joshua's last hour. So that we wouldn't find you with bloody hands."

Again Stuebner paused, exhausted. His lips quivered and drops of spittle trickled to the floor, where they lay like glass beads.

"Why are you looking at me like that, you poor blockheads?" he went on. His elbows approached his body, and it was as though he were pressing his breast together with his forearms. "Why don't you pack up? Why don't you yoke your oxen? Why are you sitting here and waiting? Run, run for your lives, you and your wives and children. A murderer is your preacher and the locusts are already upon us. Don't you hear the noise of their wings? Don't you see how the sky grows dark with their shadow? Don't you feel the air full of them? Don't you feel yourself breathing them in with every breath, choking on them?" He opened his mouth and thrust out his tongue, as though he were going to vomit. His eyes rolled wildly, so that only the bluish whites could be seen. His panting became a horrible groan and he fell unconscious.

They laid him on a bed in Colbert's bedroom and prepared to leave the house.

Jeremiah barred their way. His big body filled the door, and he had to keep his head bowed to avoid the square oaken beams. His shadow darkened the room. The men stood indecisive when they saw the exit blocked.

"Don't you want at least to hear me out?" Jeremiah asked.

"After God's voice has spoken so clearly to us?" Colbert said.

"God's voice?"

"Do you think dumb little Stuebner could have made it all up himself?"

"And now you want to flee? Desert? Throw up everything we have begun? Even the fruits of the fields you will let lie and rot? The houses you built can fall to ruin and the wells dry up and the dam turn to dust? You prefer to listen to the testimony of a madman?"

He took a step toward them. The men could not see his face because the light from the door dazzled them. They looked uncertainly at one another. They were tired and hungry. They wanted to get out of the stuffy room. Their heads felt heavy and dulled.

"Haven't we had enough for to-day?" Fuller asked.

"Enough foolishness for a lifetime," Jeremiah replied. "Since when does God speak out of the mouths of madmen? Since when has He chosen scandalmongers to be the spokesmen of His will? Or are there any here who consider me the murderer of Joshua?"

They did not answer, and Jeremiah went on. "Can one inspire belief in you only by rolling the eyes and fainting? Are your souls so sick that simple words are no longer sufficient? Have you forgotten that you are not rabble of the streets, that you owe a solemn obligation to your God? Do you believe you can leave this land as you please? Do you believe that, you, Fuller, and you, Colbert, and you and you and you?"

They were silent. They ran their tongues over their lips to lick away the dust of the room. Perhaps there was something in what Jeremiah was saying. How could you distinguish a false from a true prophet? In any case, they knew Jeremiah was not a murderer. They had long known that Joshua was doomed. That stuff was female gossip. But what Stuebner said about the locusts? Had he dug that up himself, or was he speaking with the voice of God?

Some of them slowly sank down on the boxes again, which were still standing here and there around the room. They propped their elbows on their knees and rested their chins in their hands, as though to sleep. Others stood around undecided. They rubbed their big heads and brushed their fingers through their straggly beards. It was unbearably hot. From the kitchen came the low rattle of dishes and cutlery. The wasp had stopped buzzing against the window-pane. Instead it was crawling slowly up the wood of the frame.

"I've kept my mouth shut till now," Salomon said suddenly. "Jeremiah lives with us, and you all would have said, 'Well, what does his testimony mean?' I'm only talking now to say that I believe in him and I'll stick to him no matter what happens—as long as he wants me."

He fell silent abruptly and cleared his throat. Then the room again became as still as it had been.

"Fuller," Jeremiah said, "what about you? Do you stand with those who——"

"I'm not quitting," Fuller interrupted. "Don't worry about that, Jeremiah. But I don't know what side I'm on any more. Look here, someone has to lead the fight against the locusts. Something must be done against the damned things, and if half the community pulls out, then the other half will have to do all the more to save themselves. We can really be saved only with God's help. Will He help us if you're our leader? I have kids. If I have no milk to give them, I don't know what'll happen to them. I've heard tell that you want to cut down the meadow, and that we'll have to get rid of the cows. Maybe God will take this scourge from us if you go. Maybe that's what He wants. Maybe we really ought to plead and pray and fast—how do we know?"

Jeremiah brushed his hand over his eyes. He shook his head, and the smile on his face, which had been clouded over throughout this debate, became broad and radiant once more. He took his little notebook from his pocket. It had a black oilcloth binding, which lent it a solemn appearance.

"I've written everything down here," he said, "everything that has to be done to bring us all through the next winter. No one will go hungry, neither your kids, Fuller, nor yours, Colbert. We men will have to tighten our belts a little more, though. We'll eat potatoes instead of bread, and in the spring maybe even turnips instead of potatoes. Right at the beginning we'll have to mix barley with our wheat and we won't have cash to buy things.

"And now listen well to me, for this is the last thing I have to say. God has placed His command on me and made me His instrument. I am in His hand as the plough is in yours. I break open the earth for Him because He desires it, and I cannot go against His will because it is His hand that compels me to walk the furrows.

"His will shall be done, whether or not you think it best; His will shall be done, whether or not His tool is broken in the doing; and His will shall be done now and to-morrow and in all the days to come. Amen."

During the following days Jeremiah went about his work as though nothing had happened. He stood in the furrows beside the others and the movements of his hoe were as regular as those of the other men.

The potatoes were flowering now. But the locusts did not attack them. Apparently they did not relish plants of the deadly nightshade family. The ceaseless wind had abated somewhat and there were moments, especially toward noon, when it did not blow at all. Then there was a sultry feeling of impending evil in the air, and the farmers looked up from their work and scanned the horizon for dark clouds. But the sky was empty and shimmering with heat, and the men rubbed their eyes, which smarted from gazing at the intense light.

The women worked in the vegetable gardens on the other side of the brook. Until now there had been few locusts there. The women had begun to take their children with them, and the youngsters trampled under their bare feet all the hopping, crawling insects they could. When they tired, they sat down by the brook and let their legs dangle in the water until their mothers noticed and called them back.

The locusts were worse in the meadows. Here they had acquired full horses' heads. The thorax had expanded and the muscles of the thighs had become hard and taut. The rolled wings could be distinguished clearly under transparent membranes.

Jeremiah never passed by the meadow without pausing to lie on the ground and observe the locusts. He had no idea what would be the right time to take action. But God would tell him in good time when he must strike the blow that would destroy the plague.

The abdomens of the insects had undergone the fullest change. They were fat and round now and looked like the grubs one digs out of the ground in the spring. One could see that the locusts were getting used to devouring whatever food was at hand.

Their most hideous trait, to Jeremiah, was their eternal activity. Rarely did they sit quiet in one spot. They were constantly in motion, constantly searching for new food. Gingerly as rope dancers, they clambered over the slender stalks. With their mandibles they tested out the leaves they found on their way. They took an experimental bite, and this was the only moment they sat still. A brownish liquid trickled from their mouths and they seemed to be sucking out the blood of the plant, before they really began to devour it.

The thrushes grew fat too. Early in the morning, when the locusts were still drowsy from the night, the birds came in flocks from the edge of the woods. They seized the locusts in their long yellow bills and shook them up and down. They lifted their heads to get the insect farther down into their beaks. There was a faint snap as the chitinous armour broke. The birds snatched in the air a few times, crushing the hard parts of the locusts. With the abdomen they had no difficulty, and the rest of the insect slipped down into their crops.

At noon, when it became oppressively hot, swarms of gnats hovered over the meadow. Often they settled on the feeding locusts. Jeremiah saw that they always chose the same spot, directly back of the thorax. They turned their delicate bodies on spindly legs and finally they sat perfectly still for a second or two. Then they flew away. The locusts did not notice them at all. Their whole attention was devoted to their feeding.

The other living things on the meadow did not regard the locusts. The ants built their little hills of sand on open places, and transported slivers of dry wood in their mouths. A mole threw up small hillocks of

loose soil, into which the foot sank while they were fresh. But after the sun had shone down on them for a few hours, they hardened and became places to trip over.

Later in the afternoon, when it grew cooler, the smell of hay filled the air. The thrushes vanished and the gnats moved farther down into the valley. The ants crawled into the earth and only the locusts remained.

Stuebner had recovered swiftly from his attack. Jeremiah had not encountered him, but he heard from Salomon that the little epileptic was trotting from one home to the other, gloomily prophesying disaster.

None of the farmers had deserted. "There's still time for that," they said to one another. "Why should we go now in the middle of summer? the harvest is almost here. Who wants to sell land at this time of year?"

They scarcely spoke to Jeremiah. They looked at him shyly or suspiciously. They continued to allow him to assign each man his work. But Stuebner had sent a letter to the President at Salt Lake; when the answer came they would decide what to do.

When Jeremiah and Judith met again for the first time since the meeting, they stood gazing in silence at each other for a while. It was evening; the encounter took place on the road at the upper end of the meadow. Jeremiah was tired from his work and his many cares.

"How are you, sister?" Jeremiah asked.

"I don't know. Sometimes I think I don't exist any more." She gazed down at her apron string, which her fingers were twisting and untwisting. "It's like a bad dream. Father dead and mother half crazy and the locusts and the rumours and you . . ."

She turned around, so that she stood with her back to the wind.

"I wish I could forget everything and begin again. Alone somewhere, without all the others. Just take a small patch of land and a little hut and not have anything more to do with communities and all that. And if the locusts came, then I would just fight them as well as I could alone, with my bare hands or with the flail or anything."

"And all that has been is to be wiped out? You want it no longer true that this land was promised to us? That it was our home before ever we set foot upon it? That we have something stronger binding us together, something more than a parcel of earth? Something indestructible, eternal, unique. Do you want us to close our minds to the knowledge that we have been chosen for a mission among the peoples? Are we to say, 'Choose others, God, not us, not us, because we are too weak and poor of spirit, and because we want to reap our wheat, but we do not want to build a new world?'"

Jeremiah brushed his hand across his forehead. His arm touched the girl's shoulder. For a moment he felt the warmth of her body through

the cloth of her dress. Then the wind pushed her, and she took a step forward. Slowly he lowered his arm.

She turned her head. "Don't be angry, Jeremiah," she said. "I'm just a stupid farmer girl—and I don't think I belong here at all."

With a long stride she crossed the ditch. Without turning around, she went over the meadow and down into the valley. Her skirt brushed over the flowers and grasses, over the daisies, which bent their heads and straightened up again as soon as she had passed; over the quaking grass, which stood bowed for a while; and over the locusts.

After she was out of sight, a narrow trail through the meadow remained. That was all.

The following noon, when Jeremiah came to the meadow, the air hung motionless above the grass. It seemed to have attached itself to the ground, and it rippled like waves of water over the stones on the edge of the road.

Jeremiah stood still for a moment when he reached the tree where he had sat down to rest a few days before. Yellow leaves lay on the ground, and the long visible roots were grey and dusty and hard.

He had never seen the meadow this way. Something had changed. He still did not know what. He squatted on his heels, as he often did, and propped his hands on the hot earth. Pebbles pricked his palms. When he lifted his hands again, they wore gloves of sand. He rubbed his palms with his fingers until the skin was smooth again. Then he felt in his pocket for his handkerchief, and when he had found it he balled it between his two hands. After a while he wiped his damp forehead with it.

Finally, he got up and went into the meadow. On the edge, where the roots of the tree reached, the grass was yellow and sparse, and everywhere patches of bare soil appeared. A few isolated ground huckleberries grew in these spots, and here and there yellow leaves from the tree had fallen.

The meadow really began at the cluster of yarrow. When Jeremiah reached this, he suddenly perceived what had so changed everything. The silence. This profound, uncanny silence. Not that there were no sounds. Often, at high noon, this meadow was so quiet that one could hear one's own heartbeats. But this was different. It was lack of motion. The meadow was slumbering, smothered.

A shudder of awe passed through his body. Could God have destroyed the locusts by a miracle? Had his prayers not been in vain, after all? For it was this that had transformed the meadow, this ~~that~~ had utterly changed it. The locusts were gone. Where was the incessant hopping and jumping, the crawling on waving stalks of grass, the ceaseless bustling activity that he had always noted even from a distance?

He raised his hand to his eyes and scanned the daisies, the quaking

grass, the clumps of grama and blue grass, the yarrow, the dandelions and the harebells. Nothing, nothing.

Slowly he knelt to the ground. He bent forward until he was lying flat. Then he began to crawl along the meadow.

Since the first morning he had done this frequently. He knew well the look of the green stems with the sunlight shining among them, and he knew that the locusts would crawl over his hands and his head—if they were still there.

They were still there. But they were different. They were sick. Heads down, they hung to the stalks. They did not stir. When he brushed against them, they fell to the ground as though they were drugged. Slowly, falteringly, they clambered back on a stalk and twisted around until they hung head down again, and then they remained motionless. They did not eat—God above, they had stopped eating! They were still, as though awaiting their end. Perhaps they were poisoned. Perhaps the sun had dried them up, drawn the juices from their bodies; perhaps they would die now and turn to dust.

Jeremiah picked up a locust. How strange! The creature had wings. Narrow, long, brownish wings, like the edge of a knife. A fine network of veins ran through them. The stuff they were made of was transparent as glass.

The locust pushed against Jeremiah's fingers with its long hind legs. But it seemed weak and soon ceased struggling.

When Jeremiah released it, his fingers were sticky. He rubbed them together to rid them of the unpleasant sensation. Then he reached toward the stems of the yarrow, where the locusts hung in thick clusters like grapes. He raised himself slightly on his left arm and opened his hand. Motionless, half a dozen of the winged insects sat on his palm. When they felt the sunlight upon them, they began to crawl down. They moved awkwardly, reeling; their legs scarcely supported them.

But they had wings. Again and again Jeremiah plucked locusts from the flowers and the grass. All had wings. All of them. All.

He felt the sweat dripping into his beard. His soaked shirt had become glued to his skin. His hands were covered with a viscous liquid. What about these? And these? He must make sure it was not a new species that had suddenly appeared, but *his* locusts, now become winged creatures. His locusts, and not sick—no, not sick. Very healthy and very much alive. Dear Lord, yes, alive. At best a little dazed by the glory of their new wings. Dazed and tired.

When Jeremiah straightened up, a wave of dizziness passed over him. The air still hung motionless over the meadow and the sunlight was drying the gummy wings of the locusts. With every passing minute they became drier. Every minute the sunlight bestowed new strength upon them. What would be safe from them now? Not even those vegetable

gardens on the other side of the brook. Nor the barley, also beyond the brook, the barley that they must use for bread next winter, if they were to survive the winter at all.

Jeremiah sat down in the shade of the tree. It was good to have something to lean his back against. He felt the flutes and furrows of the bark. Through the foliage he looked up at the sky, cerulean as the garment of St. John in the cathedral at Dublin, where he had been confirmed before his parents emigrated to America.

He smiled. A memory flickered across his mind. Had he not read somewhere in the Scriptures that St. John had once dined on locusts? How pleased he would have been to see their meadow. Jeremiah shook his head. "All is good, all is good," he thought.

Salomon, on his way home, found Jeremiah sleeping under the tree. He touched his shoulder.

Jeremiah opened his eyes and smiled. "I fell asleep," he said. "It's good you've come. I must talk with you. Sit down."

Salomon sat down. Dusk was falling.

Whenever there was a gust of wind, the tallow candle in Salomon's living-room flickered; a draught entered between the window frame and the wall, and the current of air surged through the whole room.

Henrietta wrapped herself closer in the woollen shawl she had thrown over her shoulders. She was still sewing the baby's shirt. She made slow progress. Too often, when she was alone, she let her hands sink on her lap and gazed at the wall, wondering how it would all turn out.

But now she was with the men. As always, Salomon had placed cushions against the back of the chair for her; she pressed into them. With tiny stitches she sewed the hem of the shirt that some day, if God willed, her baby would wear. Sometimes she bent forward and laid the cloth on the table. Carefully, to make sure it came even, she folded a narrow hem and ran her thumbnail along the fold. Then she sewed the overlap together, from the inside, so that the stitches would be invisible.

Usually, by the time she leaned back in her chair again, the cushion had slipped, and Salomon would leave his work and straighten it for her. He and Jeremiah were sharpening the scythes.

God, knows, he had taken care of them properly last fall. But it was always the same. When you took them out to use them again, you always found the edge blunt. They no longer had spots of rust, not since Salomon had made a practice of using sheep's fat on them. That was a consolation. But they were dull, and now they had to be whetted if they were to be used.

The two men talked little while they worked. Why talk? What they had to say had been said that evening. The meadow with the locusts

had to be cut. That was all there was to it. God wanted it so. He wanted these people to be saved, even though they were unwilling. He, Salomon, would help Jeremiah do it. After all, it was nothing special to sacrifice a night's sleep to mow a hay meadow.

He held his left arm around the blade of the scythe, and with his right hand he ran the whetstone over the edge. Now and then he tested the metal with his thumb. When he found an irregularity, he placed the scythe on a small anvil and carefully tapped it straight with the hammer. On the table stood a jug of water, and from time to time he dipped the whetstone into it.

Jeremiah helped him for a while. Then he went to the window and gazed out.

The moon would rise late. But even so it was already rather light; if someone passed on the road above he would be able to see them from some distance.

The chief danger, however, was the sound the scythes would make. If the Neills were not sleeping soundly in their wagon, they could not help hearing. He and Salomon would not begin right near them, of course. They would leave part of the meadow stand for a while. But nevertheless, the women might wake up.

He did not like to think of what would happen then. He would have preferred to take it all upon himself and not involve Salomon. But even with two of them it would be a fearful task to mow the meadow in one night. The sun rose early, and the first settlers who passed along the road above would alarm the whole community.

Perhaps the farmers would see he was right. Perhaps this act of his would open their eyes. Perhaps he could show them that this was the only way to destroy the locusts, and that they must do the same everywhere, among the tomatoes and the beans, in the barley- and wheatfields, and in all the meadows that were not located on the northern slope. Not much would be left, but still there would be enough for them to survive the winter and reap a full harvest next year—next year and in all the years to follow, if the Lord so willed.

Henrietta let her sewing rest in her lap.

"Don't you want to take along something to eat?" she asked.

"I don't think we'll have time for that," Salomon said.

"How about a jug of water?"

"That mightn't be a bad idea," Jeremiah nodded. "We'll need water for the whetstone, anyway."

"When day breaks I'll come out to see you there," Henrietta said.

Salomon shook his head. "When day breaks I'll come home," he replied.

Jeremiah turned his head.

"If you're ready, let's go now," he said.

"I'm ready." Salomon put the whetstone in his pocket. Then he bent over Henrietta, who gazed up at him. He kissed her on the forehead. She would sleep alone to-night for the first time since their marriage. Or would she sleep at all?

"Go to bed, Henrietta," he said.

She nodded.

"Will you worry?"

"No," she said smilingly, "only I'll be so awfully lonesome while you're gone."

Jeremiah opened the door. The room grew dark as the draught pressed the light of the candle low. It almost went out. A little sand trickled down from the roof. The wind forced the door against Jeremiah, who had to brace his shoulders to hold it open. The hinges squeaked, and the window frame rattled incessantly.

"Are you coming?" Jeremiah asked. He was holding an earthen jug in one hand and a scythe in the other.

"Yes," Salomon said, and brushed his hand across his wife's forehead.

Jeremiah heard Henrietta say, "God watch over you," and then Salomon was at his side. They crossed the road and went into the bushes and undergrowth on the other side, where they would not be seen.

In the woods it was darker than they had expected. After a few steps the slope was uphill. The earth was soft, and here and there were small heaps of last year's leaves. The wind was intangible, but its roar was always present and all other sounds were swallowed up by it.

They followed the path the deer used when they came to the brook for water. They had to bend low to make their way, and frequently they stood still and groped ahead with their hands to feel whether pine branches blocked the way.

When they had gone about halfway up the hill, they escaped the wind. The steady roar disappeared from one moment to the next. Now the woods around them came alive. Twigs snapped and leaves rustled, and they heard each other's breathing. At times they would stand still suddenly, prickling with the feeling that someone was walking at their side. They started when a screech owl flew up, and they huddled in sudden fear against a thick trunk when they thought they heard voices.

"The brook," Jeremiah said softly after a moment, and they went on.

The moon had not yet risen when they entered the meadow. But in comparison with the woods it was bright. A few yards away they saw the sprawling shadow of the Neills' wagon.

A little farther up was a small dark spot. At first they thought it was a wild animal lurking in the meadow. Then they remembered that it was the small rock they had never been able to remove.

They divided the meadow lengthwise into two halves. They did not speak, but each man understood the other's gestures.

When Jeremiah felt the scythe slice through the grass in his first stroke, he murmured a prayer. Salomon thought of Henrietta and of the child, and wondered how it would all end. Would they never have a secure and peaceful life? Perhaps the baby would some day, he thought.

They had to grip the scythes short, because the meadow sloped upward. They swung in tight arcs, taking care that the blades did not catch in the ground. Every time one struck a stone and the metal gave out a singing tone, he stood still for a moment, listening. But nothing stirred, and the only sound was the swish of the other's scythe in the grass.

The meadow was dry. Perhaps there would be dew toward morning; perhaps the air was so parched that there would be no dew at all. They saw no locusts. But sometimes they felt them; their feet crushed a small heap of them when they tramped on the cut grass. There was a crackling as when one steps into a thin layer of ice covering a puddle. Then they would scrape their shoes over the grass, trying to rub off the repulsive thing that was clinging to them.

By the time the moon rose they had already cut a wide swath; but they saw that they must go faster if they were to finish before dawn. The lane they had cut gleamed silver as the moonlight was reflected from the blades of grama grass. It seemed sometimes like a silver-green band of water.

The fragrance of hay arose. But perhaps this was their imagination, and the fragrance had been in the air all the while. The locusts had gnawed off stalks without eating them all, and these stalks had dried to hay in the sun.

Jeremiah stopped for a moment. With his handkerchief he wiped his brow. He felt his whole body soaked with sweat. Before him, like an endless plain, sloped the meadow. It was so far to the road he must reach by morning. Behind him—that was so small a part of the work that must be done. He gazed admiringly at Salomon who was working like a machine. The man had not yet exerted himself. What tremendous reserves of strength he must have. And if God intended him, Jeremiah, to finish this work, he must summon up the same strength. Perhaps he already had it and did not know it. Perhaps he had not yet drawn from a reservoir deep within him. How foolish he was. From old habit, he had stopped for breath. Because this was what his father had done. Because this was what all farmers did. But not because he was exhausted.

He drank from the jug, and then set to work again. His scythe felt dull. He began to sharpen it. The cool night breeze touched his sweat-soaked body and he shivered. Again he wiped his forehead dry.

By now Salomon was a good stretch ahead of him. If only he would wait. It would be so much easier if he didn't have to see the figure of the other man diagonally above him. But Salomon did not stop. Instead

he seemed to move even faster. Perhaps he thought he would also have to mow some of Jeremiah's half.

Jeremiah brooded. Why had not God given him the strength he needed for this work? Why had He made him even weaker than other men? Perhaps he was ill. Perhaps this was wrong, what he was doing. Perhaps he had misunderstood the voices and only dreamed his converse with God. Was he mad to cut down the meadow? Perhaps it would only make things worse. It might incite the locusts to descend upon the rest of the crops; to devour all they had left untouched so far. Perhaps they would take everything the settlers possessed because he, Jeremiah Kentrup, had sinned. Was he a dreamer, a foolish visionary—not a prophet?

He set his teeth. No, no, he would not strain any more. That was it. He must outstride the point of utter weariness, draw from the untapped strength within himself. As Samson did, he thought.

He relaxed the grip of his thumb. He had the feeling that it would go easier if he did not clutch the scythe so tightly. He tried to relax the muscles of his arms also. He stood up straighter, and finally he leaned backward to lengthen his swing. The blade did not cut. It slid over the tops of the grass and flowers without laying them low. He had to repeat the stroke. As he swung again, he struck a hidden stone, and a third stroke was needed.

He felt the drops of sweat trickling slowly down the side of his face. His skin began to smart intolerably. But he knew that if he stopped to wipe his brow, all these strokes would be wasted and he would have to begin again. Everything swam hazily before his eyes. There seemed to be a great ring around the moon. The sweat in his eyelashes reflected the light, and all at once each single ray of moonlight seemed visible. Minute by minute the bands around his chest tightened, and his stomach felt sick. He tried to belch, thinking this would relieve him. But he could not; instead, he yawned.

But the scythe cut through the grass without pause. He took even, short steps to the side, and the steel cut evenly about two inches above the ground through the dandelions and daisies and the grama grass.

He was surprised when he noticed that he had reached the level of the rock outcropping where he had first seen the locusts. Unknowingly, he had put a good stretch behind him. Now he did not feel that these arms swinging in front of him were his own. All that he, Jeremiah, did was to take little, shuffling steps; he ran along behind the work that someone else did for him. The cool night air dried the sweat on his brow, and inaudibly he hummed a melody. The sky was deep black; to see the moon he had to lift his head. The moonlight was white and coruscating, and when he squinted he saw the single rays of light.

Salomon was still ahead of Jeremiah. For a while he had actually

thought he would have to take over some of Jeremiah's work. It would not matter to him; his muscles were like iron.

How many meadows had he mowed in his lifetime? As long as he could remember, he had had blisters on the inside of his thumb, from the handle of the scythe. How easily the blade sliced through this grass. Perhaps the locusts had already devoured so much of it that he needed only half his strength. Perhaps, too, this kind of grass was more tender than the kind he knew. Or was it the wetness of the night? Was Henrietta sleeping? If only he knew just when the baby would come. It would be a hard time for a baby. Evil times, when God demanded that they burn their hay and sell their cows in order to have bread for the winter. And he had not even been able to make a decent cradle. And the roof needed repairing.

His thoughts returned to Henrietta. She would never make a good mother. A little too soft and easygoing. They were still at the bottom of the hill, the whole community. They still had a long way to climb. Still not enough flour for bread and they had to grind their wheat in the coffee grinder. Good that they had Jeremiah. If it was a boy, they would name him Jeremiah.

When he struck a stone at the edge of the meadow, he bent over and reached for it to throw it away. Next year they wouldn't be bothered by this one. The stone was rooted in the earth and it took all Salomon's strength to tear it loose from its ancient bed. When he finally had it up, he had to push it away; he could not lift it. But even then he did not pant.

Jeremiah had almost caught up to him. It was miraculous, the way the preacher was working. Had *he* mowed so many meadows in his life? Salomon listened to the sound of the scythe. Even, good and even, he thought. Almost like a machine. And no pauses for rest at all. He didn't look his strength, Jeremiah. If they went on this way, they would finish it by dawn. Henrietta surely wouldn't be asleep when he came home. Perhaps she would already have made tea.

Slowly the men's shadows moved along the ground, from rear to front. The first shadows they had seen were the shadows of the scythes, but now their own lay on the stubble and were beginning to advance into the unknown part of the meadow. The tree on the road up above was clearly visible now. But perhaps it was still far away. Your eyes deceived you easily at night.

Back of the tree was the road. It was no more than bare earth between deep wheel ruts, and piles of stones on the edges. In the spring sparse grass grew on it. But now everything was naked, dry and dusty. The road was the border of the meadow. When they had worked their way up to the road they were through. It would be broad daylight when they went home. Perhaps they would not meet anyone. Perhaps they would see only the sparrows dusting themselves in their little holes next to the wheel ruts.

It will be good if we don't meet anyone, Salomon thought. After you've mowed a whole meadow, you're damned tired. And when you're tired, you don't want to make explanations. Besides, Henrietta was waiting.

Let them come, Jeremiah thought. I'll prove to them that I'm right. If one is a man whom God has given the strength and the reason to defend oneself, one doesn't sit idle and let the locusts devour all that one has. God wanted man to earn his daily bread. This was better service to Him than all prayers.

The first indication they had that dawn was breaking was that they saw their hands. Already they had colour. Brownish and slightly pink on the sides of their fingers. They could even see the dark rims of their nails. And the rest of the hand was visible too. But they were only outlines. Lifeless forms. But no, their hands were alive already. Yes, their hands were alive. They held the handles of the scythes and they cut the grass. The scythes gave out an odd, swishing sound. . . . Was Henrietta asleep? Would she come now that day was breaking? Who would be the first to see what had taken place overnight? Uncanny, the way Jeremiah had held out. Maybe it would be better to speed up a little. There was still a good patch to go before they reached the road.

A cock crowed. We won't quite finish it, Jeremiah thought. Would it do any harm if a small part of the meadow remained standing? When we burn the hay—suppose the locusts all crawl into the uncut part? When we burn the hay. I hope we will burn it. There are only the two of us against all the others, and if they want to they can stop us. All they need do is post sentries. Would I do it, anyway, even against the sentries? But perhaps it hasn't occurred to them that all this must go up in flames. Perhaps they think it's enough if it just lies here and dries out.

The flowers, too, had taken on colour now. They were white and yellow and violet, and before they fell they inclined a little to one side. The cut stems of the dandelions were ivory, where the wolf's milk bled from them. The stubble looked like the ripples that spread out when a pebble is thrown into a lake.

The locusts still were almost motionless. Could they be dying off, after all? They lay in clusters under the mown stalks. Here and there one crawled above the grass and sat drowsily for a few seconds.

If only we had a roller, Salomon thought. A really heavy roller. Then we could crush them all. He trampled a small clump of locusts under his heavy boot. He had to grind down on them several times with his heel before their legs stopped kicking. When he lifted his foot, there was a small depression in the soil.

They felt the wind now. It could not be long before sunrise. Then the first settlers would pass on the road above.

"We won't finish," Salomon said.

He stood on the line that divided their halves, close enough to Jeremiah to speak softly.

Jeremiah did not look up. "Keep going," he said.

Salomon spat in his palms before he gripped the scythe again. The hardest part is still to come, he thought. What would they say when they discovered that the meadow had been cut? It would be better to meet them after having slept.

Jeremiah thought of nothing at all. He mowed the meadow; that was all. All the speeches he had thought out during the night, all the imposing and convincing things to say, were gone. He had done what God had commanded him to do. Let them think what they pleased. Perhaps they would understand it later on. No, he could say nothing to them. Not a word. The meadow was cut, and when the sun had dried it they would set it ablaze. Yes, there it was, the sun. Good. If God had sent rain, all this work would have been in vain.

It was Salomon who first heard Colbert's shoes clattering along the road. Colbert must be very close already, for he could clearly distinguish each step. He must be walking slowly, deliberately, as he always walked. When the sound stopped, Salomon looked up cautiously to see whether Colbert had discovered them. No, not yet. He must have stood still for some other reason. Perhaps he was waiting for one of the other men. Stuebner had to pass this way. Had Jeremiah heard him yet? Salomon could not tell. Jeremiah was mowing the grass with even, regular strokes—as he had worked all night. It would be strange if he could see anything at all, with his eyes half closed all the time. Should he call his attention to Colbert?

There they were again, the steps. But there were no voices. No, Colbert must be alone. Perhaps he had just looked at the wheat. Perhaps he had picked up a locust. Now he would call out, any moment now. It would be better to stop mowing and look up. He must come into sight near the tree. Would he see them right away? In any case he could not help hearing Jeremiah's scythe. Shame they couldn't cut this last little piece. They ought to go up to the road and wait for Colbert. It would be better that way, better than working on the slope and have Colbert above them and be dazzled by the sun when they looked up.

At first Colbert did not see them. He crossed almost to the middle of the meadow before he looked up and stood still. He had his hoe on his shoulder. The wind and the clatter of his wooden shoes had drowned out the sound of the scythes, and he had not heard them.

Jeremiah went on mowing as though quite alone with Salomon.

"Hey, you!"

Jeremiah seemed not to have heard the cry. His scythe cut through the grass as though nothing could stop it until the last blade lay on the ground. Salomon stood motionless, his eyes fixed on Colbert. He could

see little more than the man's figure, which was a black outline against the bright sky. His eyes hurt when he looked up so long; and Colbert's body seemed gradually to be absorbed in the radiation that was all around him. Nevertheless, Salomon did not look away. His hands played with the handle of the scythe. The wood was rounded and smooth, and it was pleasant to feel something between his fingers.

"Hey, Jeremiah," Colbert shouted. His voice was charged with rage and so loud that but for the wind it could have been heard as far down as the Neills' wagon. "Jeremiah, have you gone crazy? Hey, are you crazy?"

Salomon looked at Jeremiah. Would he stop? He could see nothing. The light in the sky had almost blinded him and he had to close his eyes. But he could hear. He could hear the blade of the scythe hissing through the grass. Now it hit a small stone, paused for a moment, and then mowed on, mowed the meadow, moved on inexorably, irrevocably.

Colbert took his hoe from his shoulder. There was a soft thud as he threw it down on the meadow. A puff of dust rose. Through eyes narrowed to slits, Salomon saw the big man stride across the ditch and with head lowered like a bull approach Jeremiah. His hands brushed the tops of the grass. He stumbled over an invisible stone. He stepped into a small hole and the grass seemed to grow to his hips. He was walking straight into the path of the scythe. The next swing would strike him if he didn't stand still. Or perhaps Jeremiah would . . .

"Jeremiah," Salomon shouted.

With a swift step, Colbert evaded the swinging scythe. It swished past his ankles by a hair. A clump of cut daisies leaned against him. He took a step forward and the daisies sank to the ground on both sides of him. A few blades of grass remained clinging to the coarse material of his pants.

The backswing of the wooden handle struck him on his left knee. It was not a hard blow and did not hurt him. But it enraged him.

His fist struck. There was little fat round Colbert's fingers. When he clenched his hand, it was like a stump of oakwood. His wrists and muscles were hard and powerful.

Jeremiah did not feel the blow for more than the fraction of a second. There was a searing pain in his lips and his teeth. He gazed wide-eyed at Colbert, and he seemed to be asking, "Why have you done this?"

Then he fell over backwards. His hands still clung to the scythe. In falling he drew it a little way across the stubble. When he hit the ground, he rolled downhill a few feet before he came to rest.

Salomon heard Colbert's heavy breathing. He dropped the handle of the scythe. Heavily, indecisively, he went toward the two men. He saw Colbert's tightly compressed lips, and he saw the man rub his left hand over the knuckles of his right as though trying to wipe away a stain. He felt Colbert's eyes turn to him.

"Help him," Colbert said, scarcely moving his lips. When Salomon still stood motionless, he repeated, "Help him. Didn't you hear me? Help him."

Colbert was still rubbing his knuckles. Salomon did not look away from him, but he walked slowly toward Jeremiah.

The preacher lay limp on the ground, as though he had just lain down to rest. His right cheek was pillowed upon the mown grass. His nose and lips were bleeding.

Salomon took his handkerchief and dipped it into the earthenware jug. There was still a little ice-cold water in the jug. He brushed it over Jeremiah's brow and his closed eye, and then wiped away the blood. With thumb and forefinger he forced Jeremiah's lips apart to pour a little of the water into his mouth. He shuddered at what he saw. Colbert's fist had knocked out Jeremiah's front teeth.

He must try to turn the unconscious man over. Otherwise he might choke on the teeth when he came to.

"What's the matter?" Colbert asked. "For God's sake, what is it?"

"You knocked his teeth out!"

"Is he alive?"

"There aren't many who'll live when they get that ham of yours in their face." He nodded at Colbert's fist.

"But Jeremiah? Jeremiah? Is he alive?"

"Do you think I'm trying to turn a corpse on its belly? He's alive, all right. And he'll live longer and better than all of us put together."

Salomon squeezed water from his handkerchief on to Jeremiah's head. It hung in the red hair in a film, and a few drops ran down the side of his face into the grass. Then Salomon tried to open his mouth. He had to find the teeth. When he finally succeeded in prying open the tightly clenched jaws, the bloody teeth fell on the grass.

Voices were approaching from all sides now. Down the road came Stuebner with several of the other men, and from the valley came the Neill women and Judith.

"Who mowed the meadow?" Stuebner asked.

Colbert pointed his finger at the still-prostrate Jeremiah.

"Don't forget about me," Salomon said. "He and I cut this meadow. We worked all night to fulfil God's will. For thanks Colbert knocked his teeth out."

"It must have been the devil's will when you cut a meadow at night before it's ready. When you take the milk out of the mouths of children. The devil's will . . ."

"I shouldn't have hit him," Colbert said, beginning once more to rub his knuckles. "I shouldn't have done it. Even if he was the devil himself, I shouldn't have done it. I swore I would never do it again. I swore to myself once . . ."

Judith knelt down beside Jeremiah.

"Give me your handkerchief," she said.

Again and again she dipped it into the cold water and rubbed it over Jeremiah's temples. His eyelids began to quiver. His face twitched as though he was in great pain.

"Is he coming to?" Colbert asked.

Judith lifted her finger to her lips. There was dead silence. Even the wind was still.

The first time they heard the cry they thought Jeremiah had sighed. They listened. Yes, there it was again, but it did not come from the meadow. From somewhere far away. And it was not a cry. It was a call. A distant call. Perhaps a call for help. Or a name. Or else the children were playing with the echoes.

They looked at one another. They turned their heads and cocked their ears toward the sound. Wrinkles formed on their brows and over their noses. They opened their mouths slightly, because that aided hearing.

There it was again. The same syllables repeated over and over. But it sounded farther away. Perhaps it was only muted because a hill or the wood was in the way.

Salomon and Judith noticed nothing. They did not look up. Their heads were bent low, as though they wanted nothing to escape them, not the slightest motion Jeremiah made, the slightest change that took place in his face or his body.

They all started when an unmistakable gasping sound poured from Jeremiah's lips. Stuebner and the others, who had been listening to the sound in the distance, turned their heads.

But then came the call again. Nearer. Yes, it was definitely nearer. Someone was calling. Someone was running up the hill, looking for someone. Someone who was frightened or in a hurry—a woman or a child. A high voice, at any rate.

Jeremiah coughed. He had blood in his windpipe, and he began to spit it out. Colour came back into his face. Salomon propped him up, so that his head was a little higher. Judith went back to the other women.

Again the cry came. It sounded like "Hello," but it was clearly different. Clearly three syllables. Salomon heard it now for the first time. He laid Jeremiah's head back, so that his big Adam's apple projected prominently from his bare throat.

"Someone's calling me," he said.

They looked at him. Of course, that was it. The voice was calling "Salomon." How could they not have realized it all this time? That was it. Of course.

Salomon let Jeremiah lie back on the grass. The leather of his shoes creaked as he straightened up. In the midst of the movement he stopped.

Half squatting, half standing, he listened to the cry, which was clear and close now: "Sa—lo—mon."

"Here!"

He had funnelled his hands over his mouth, and his voice was so powerful that a faint echo rebounded from the other end of the valley.

When the echo died, they all listened again. The last cry had unquestionably come from the valley. Someone must be in the woods, on one side of the Neills' wagon, where Salomon and Jeremiah had stepped forth on to the meadow that night. Or perhaps a little lower down.

Salomon began to run downhill. Could it be Henrietta calling him? Could she be looking for him? But she knew the way, she would follow the road, especially in her condition. Or could it be that . . . ? Was that why they were calling him? "Here, here!" he roared. "Here, here!"

Ruth Fuller's face was as broad as her father's, and as she came running out of the woods and stopped breathlessly before Salomon, her face was just as ruddy. She had a big tear in her skirt and there were bloody scratches on her bare legs.

"Come quick," she said to Salomon. "Quick, quick. Aunt Henrietta is sick . . ."

"What's the matter?" Salomon gasped. He took the child by the hand and began ascending the meadow again.

"I don't know. Sick, very sick. And she has such pain. So much pain, all the time."

The child could not match his pace with her little legs. Salomon picked her up. "For God's sake, why did you come through the woods instead of by the road?"

"Aunt Henrietta said you must be way down in the valley."

"And how do you know she's sick?"

"Me and Julie and Marie and Marthe were going through the vegetable garden to the huckleberries. And then all of a sudden we heard screaming. Such awful screaming. And when we got to where the screaming came from we saw Aunt Henrietta. Then Julie sent me away because I'm the biggest. And Aunt Henrietta said I should run through the woods."

Salomon put the child down.

"What is it?" the men asked when he raced past them.

"Henrietta," he answered. He added a few garbled words of explanation, but they could not understand him. They did not find out what had happened until the child came up to them.

The women whispered among themselves for a few seconds, and then went back up the meadow.

The men looked significantly at one another and smiled faintly. A brief smile passed over even Stuebner's distorted features. Colbert put his arm under Jeremiah's shoulders and helped him to his feet.

"Forgive me," he said. "Don't bear me a grudge. I think I was right to hit you, preacher—only not so hard, not so damned hard."

Jeremiah was glad of his support. He could not have stood alone. He was dizzy and weary and weak, and his lips smarted. They felt terribly swollen. He had to keep his mouth slightly open to breathe.

"Look here, Jeremiah," Colbert added, "this here is a community and I don't think everyone can do as he likes. We didn't decide to sacrifice the meadow. Even if you are right that it's the way to destroy the locusts, you can't do it unless we agree."

He fell silent, at a loss for words. Out of the corner of his eye he observed Jeremiah. He saw his bowed head and closed eyes, and the crusted blood around his mouth and in his beard, and the faint smile on his lips. He helped him to the tree and let him sit down again in the shade, where the cool morning wind laved his face.

Colbert leaned Jeremiah's back against the tree. Then he stood above him uncertainly. He looked toward the road where his hoe was lying.

"Are you coming?" the others asked.

"If you want, I'll come over at noon to see how you are, Jeremiah," he said. "It's rotten to leave you alone now. But you know how it is."

He started off. Then he stopped again.

"I think you'd better not go to Salomon's to-day," he said. "I think Henrietta's having her baby."

Jeremiah did not open his eyes. He sat still, head slightly bowed, and seemed to be smiling in his sleep. As Colbert turned hesitantly away, he heard Jeremiah say something. He stood still again to catch the words.

"What did you say?" he asked.

There was no answer. Colbert walked over to his hoe and picked it up. As he bent down, he realized what it was Jeremiah had murmured.

He shook his head and followed the others, who were walking through the potato field, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Did he say anything?" they asked Colbert.

Colbert nodded. "He said, all is good."

Salomon's son came into the world with the help of Julie. She had never before seen a woman give birth. But as a child she had sat in the stable when the cow bore its calf, and she had learned that it helped the animal if it was stroked. More than this one could not do. The Lord would see to the rest.

And so Julie stroked Henrietta and prayed inwardly. She did not utter a sound when Henrietta dug her fingernails into her hand. Tears came to her eyes, but only out of sympathy. She had sent the children out. It was better for them not to see how hard it was to bring a living human being into the world.

When the baby came, she cut the navel cord with a pair of scissors.

She was glad when it began to scream, and she wrapped it in a blanket so that all that could be seen of it was its tiny face. Its head was covered with hair; it was very dirty and would have to be bathed, she was sure. Sooner or later someone would come who would know what to do. She would have gone ahead and done something herself, had it been her own child. But with a stranger's baby you had to be careful.

It was good that Henrietta was quiet now. Her face was friendly and peaceful beneath her dishevelled hair. But the infant screamed without pause. Maybe it was hungry, poor thing. Little calves always started sucking as soon as they were born.

"Give me the baby," Henrietta said.

Julie took up the bundle and handed it to her. Henrietta opened her eyes and stared at it in astonishment.

"It has red hair," she said.

Julie wanted to say that she thought the baby was hungry. But it was hard to find the words. And if God wished, He would tell the mother Himself.

"Help me put him to my breast," Henrietta said.

Julie nodded. It was well. It had not been necessary to speak. God saw to everything.

She opened Henrietta's blouse. She was about to put the baby's mouth to the nipple, because she thought the little one would never find it alone. But before she could help, the baby had taken it in its mouth.

When Salomon arrived, Henrietta and her baby were sleeping, and Julie was sitting beside them, chasing the flies.

Jeremiah slept under the tree most of the day. Even at noon, when Colbert brought him something to eat and water for washing, he did not awaken fully.

He did not really come to until the men shook him and told him it was evening and that he could go home; Salomon's baby was a boy.

He did not go by the path, but over the unmown part of the meadow. The air was filled with the fragrance of hay. It still lay as he had cut it. It seemed strangely flat. As though it had been pressed into the ground.

It seemed to have changed colour already. A mist hung over it and softened all outlines. But still, in the soft twilight, every detail was clearly visible.

A locust landed on Jeremiah's coat lapel. He had not seen it coming. But he felt the impact against his body. It sat motionless. It was a strong creature, and when Jeremiah stood still and snatched at it, it hopped away with a fluttering sound.

Jeremiah thought of getting down in the cut grass and examining it. But every movement made his head ache. He tried to kneel. Even the attempt made him dizzy.

Slowly he walked on. His hands brushed the heads of the flowers. He touched the leaves of the wild sorrel lightly, and the pain was so great he had to suppress an outcry. His whole palm was wounded. The blisters where he had held the handle of the scythe had burst and the raw flesh smarted intolerably.

The pain was fearful, especially in his biceps, when he lifted his hands. But the pain in his hips was worst. As though his spinal cord had been broken. When he wanted to change his direction, he had to be very careful because it was unbearable torment to turn the upper part of his body.

Although the air was cool and the wind from the valley was sweeping up the hill, there was sweat on his forehead. He hesitated a long time before he dared to cross the ditch into the road. When finally, with mincing steps, he came to the slope on the meadow side and began to descend into the ditch, he felt that he could go no farther. Perhaps he would have to spend the night standing here. Maybe he would be better in the morning; then he could try to walk on. Or else someone might come along and help him.

He glanced up at the darkening sky. It would not send him the strength he needed. God had already given him all the strength He would give the night when he had to cut the meadow. Then the miracle had happened because it was necessary. He, Jeremiah, had become the will-less tool of necessity. But now that was past. He must go home alone. He, the wretched preacher, Jeremiah Kentrup.

His foot touched the half-rotted foliage. Step by step he propelled himself up the other side of the ditch. He became entangled in the blackberry bushes. He felt himself slipping slowly on to the smooth grass. The thorns tore free of his clothing with a little snap.

He walked on a few steps in the ditch. Again he tried to mount the slope. It was good that he was alone and no one could see his weakness.

With his handkerchief, which was still damp from the morning and smelled of sweat and blood and dirt, he wiped his forehead. Inch by inch he forced his feet to move up the slope. As though walking barefoot, he dug his toes into his shoes—as if he could dig them into the ground so as not to slip backwards again.

Finally he reached the brink of the slope. With difficulty he fought his way through the thick clumps of buffalo grass which were now all that separated him from the road. And then he had reached it.

Breathless, he stood still on the road. The worst was past now. He looked around. Here and there lights shone in the darkness. The people were at supper, or talking, or reading the Scriptures.

Jeremiah took a deep breath. He would save them. He had not been mistaken. God desired this work, and he was God's instrument. Had he not been His scythe this past night? What did it matter if they beat him

down? He rose again. Always and eternally he rose again. He would remain lying by the wayside only when He no longer needed him. Only then.

At this time the elders of the settlement were deciding to expel Jeremiah from the community and to send to Salt Lake for a new preacher. They had received no answer to their first letter as yet. But time was pressing. And their very lives were at stake here. No, not the religion. Their lives.

The pain moderated after Jeremiah had walked awhile. But it came back in sudden surges when he tripped over a stone or slipped into the wheel ruts. He was happy when he saw the light of Salomon's lamp, splashing a yellow square upon the road.

He knocked on the door. The voices he had heard within fell silent. Jeremiah leaned against the wall of the house. He waited for Salomon to open for him because his hand hurt fiercely when he tried to lift the heavy latch.

When the hinges creaked finally and a bright crack appeared before him, and Salomon's face, he realized that he could not have walked another step.

"Thank God, you're here," Salomon said. "I wanted to go looking for you. But we have a baby. She had it all alone. A boy. Henreitta says we'll call him Jeremiah."

Jeremiah stood still. He felt the coolness of the wood against his sweating back. It felt good to stand quiet. He wanted nothing more than to lean against good, firm, cool wood. He could feel the irregularities of the original tree trunks; the places where branches had once grown; there were small swellings beneath the bark.

"Why don't you say anything?" Salomon asked.

"I'm so happy for you." His lips hurt every time he opened them, and his words sounded as though they issued from the mouth of a toothless old man.

"Are you sick, Jeremiah?" Salomon whispered. "Henrietta mustn't have any excitement. The women say it's on account of the milk. I haven't told her about the fight with Colbert. I said everything was fine."

"Yes, yes, all is good," Jeremiah said. "Maybe I'd better sleep somewhere else to-night. She might get excited if she saw me, without my teeth and with this wound on my face."

"Yes, that's right. I thought of that myself. How about waiting until she's asleep before you come in?"

"Don't worry about me. There are plenty of places where I can sleep. Plenty. When you're as tired as I am. And it's warm and dry. God's trees grow everywhere, and their broad trunks are like the backs of grandfather chairs, the kind you can sleep in sitting up."

"I'm so happy about the baby. *He* must love me, don't you think?"

"Whom does He not love?" Jeremiah said. "Do you want to go in to her now?"

"Shouldn't I bring you a blanket at least?"

"Salomon," Henrietta called.

"God bless you," Jeremiah whispered.

"See you in the morning," Salomon replied, closing the door.

Jeremiah crossed the road. The wind came from the side. It whirled small pebbles and grains of sand along with it. Jeremiah thrust his right shoulder forward and turned his head. His lips smarted. Cautiously, he felt his way over the wheel ruts—two deep shadows that lost themselves in the distance. He felt the edges of the ruts yield under his shoes. Through the leather he felt rough stones underfoot, and when he walked there was a scraping sound.

As on the previous night, he went among the trees with arms outstretched before him. The moon would be rising any moment now. The air was already heavy with its light. Only the hill where the potatoes grew still hid it.

During the day spiders had spun their webs between the trees, and Jeremiah felt the threads float lightly against his eyes and nose. He could not lift his hand because of the pain in his arms, and when he tried to brush them away with his shoulder, he felt as though his neck was breaking.

Finally he came to a small clearing surrounded by stout oak trees. When the sun shone, there was always the scent of warmth and dry foliage here, and a faint trace of formic acid from the ant hills. But now it was cool and pleasant, and the wind was still. A peculiar sort of grass grew in this clearing, which Colbert had once told him was bluegrass. It was finer and darker than other grasses, and did not grow in clumps. It always looked like a deep carpet, and when one walked across it in the sunlight, one left a gleaming silver trail.

Jeremiah walked slowly toward an oak. When he felt its trunk, with the thousand flutes and furrows in its bark, he felt happy that he had reached his goal. He ran his hands over the tree to find a place that was as smooth as possible. The moss that grew on the bark clung to his fingers like powder. His fingers felt as though he had dipped them into a bag of flour.

He leaned his back against the oak, and then, very gradually, slid down into the grass. When finally he was sitting on the grass, he was so utterly exhausted that he remained perfectly still for a few minutes. They he pushed aside the little stones that were cutting into his legs.

By the time the moon rose he was sound asleep.

Toward morning the dew settled on the meadow. The single drops that usually dotted the grass flowed together and formed a layer of water that completely covered the cut stalks. The hot sun of the day before had already dried many of the thinner and more delicate blades. But the woody stems of the daisies were still fresh, and the dandelions and grama grass also were unchanged. They began to absorb the moisture. The water pressed into the wound where the scythe had lopped them off, and they revived.

The ground underneath was warm and the air in the stubble was saturated with water vapour that could not evaporate. The young red clover had peeped above the ground only a few days before, and the scythes had spared it because it was still so small. Now it began to grow faster. It shot up visibly in the hothouse atmosphere. The ants dug their holes deeper and crawled into the ground to escape the heat.

The feet of the thrushes threw up little whirls of grass as they hopped around on the meadow. They were looking for locusts, and only where there were gaps could they find any.

But when the sun rose, they were there. The film of water on the scythed field evaporated in the first rays that charged down from over the potato hill. Beginning on the borders, the layer of water shrank together like a carpet that is rolled up. Gaps formed. The air began to circulate among the blades of grass. Tentacles of the morning wind shook the half-dried leaves. The scythe wounds turned wooden and brown and stopped absorbing water. The locusts began to wave their antennæ. They crawled along the stalks that lay on the ground, as they had done when the meadow stood upright. By preference they chose grasses that slanted up, but they were everywhere. It was as though a new brood had come out of the earth during the night. They were no longer the creatures Jeremiah had examined so often. They were even unlike the locust that had settled upon his coat the night before. They were greenish-brown and glistening, with armoured breasts and shimmering wings. They seemed longer and narrower and more dangerous. When a puff of wind touched them, they sprang into the air, and often they transformed their leap into a brief flight. Still none of them paid any attention to the others. As always, they stepped on one another, fell in heaps to the ground, separated and began again as though nothing had happened. Their movements had perhaps become a little quicker, as though they no longer had any time to lose.

But the main difference was that they ate more. How they ate! They could not sate themselves. They did not stop for a moment, and now it made no difference to them whether they gnawed woody stalks or tender grasses and leaves. In many places they sat in a tangled heap. The positions of their bodies did not matter to them. All they cared about was that their mandibles could grasp the leaves. They ate with their

heads down or up, with others standing on their bellies or their backs; they ate whether their comrades were standing on their eyes or on the soft parts of their abdomens, and when the leg of a neighbour came between their jaws, they cracked and chewed it like grass.

Brown juice flowed from their mouths and ran down along the green stems. It dripped on those sitting below them. Beads of it hung on their faces, and they dropped their excrement into the grass along with the parts of leaves they still would not eat. The warmer it became the more the air smelled of them. Of all their excretions and exhalations. And of hay.

The spiders that were trying to spin their webs crawled into holes because the threads were torn again and again. The beetles, crawling portly and black over the stubble, played dead when a tangle of kicking locust legs touched them. The ants darted out and seized the woody parts of the leaves, which the locusts rejected, and scurried away with them into their holes.

The meadow belonged to the locusts.

And Jeremiah slept.

The sun was already high in the sky when Salomon found him.

It was warm in the small clearing. The dry, ovoid pods that still hung on the broom from last year crackled as Salomon pushed through, and this was the sound that awakened Jeremiah.

He still lay as he had fallen asleep the night before. When he recognized Salomon, he smiled. "It's not bad, this bed," he said. "How are Henrietta and the boy?"

"It was mean of me not to let you in last night. Mean and dumb. Henrietta got awfully excited when she found out this morning. Please come with me right away. The others are looking for you; they say they have something to tell you."

"Help me up."

Salomon lifted him as he would a child. On his feet, he felt better. The terrible weariness of yesterday was gone. His muscles still ached—they would for some time to come. But that wasn't so bad. It had been really bad when he felt at the end of his strength.

"I'm hungry," he said.

"I'll make you something. I'll tell them to come again after you've eaten. You can't listen to them on an empty stomach."

Jeremiah held his head slightly bowed and he was still smiling. He walked stiffly and awkwardly, but he did not stumble.

"No," Jeremiah said, "I don't want them to wait. They have work to do. I won't starve."

Salomon did not reply. He walked ahead, pushing aside the branches so that Jeremiah could pass easily. Salomon supported him as they

walked through a small, clear hollow, and when they came in sight of the road, he said shyly, "Can't you guess what they want of you, Jeremiah?"

Jeremiah stood still. He grasped a young birch for support. He leaned against it and the trunk yielded slightly. The shadows of the leaves scampered over his face; then, for a moment, his whole head was laved by the bright sunlight. His lips were still swollen and narrow; dark threads of blood were encrusted on his chin.

"I know," he said. "You must not think I don't understand people because I listen to the voice of God. Their sickness is not yet over. It grows worse every day. And so they now come to drive away the physician. That's it, isn't it, Salomon?"

Salomon shrugged. "I don't know," he said, "but I don't like their faces. And it might be something like that. I've heard talk."

When they stepped out on the road, two men came toward them from the shadow of the house. There were only Colbert and Stuebner. They had a sheet of paper in their hands.

"Praise be to Jesus Christ," Jeremiah said.

"In eternity, Amen," Colbert replied.

There was a silence.

"You have been looking for me?" Jeremiah asked, and the smile on his face was reflected in his voice.

"The men wanted just to leave this letter here for you, Jeremiah," Colbert said, twisting the paper in his hands. "But I said I would bring it to you myself. I didn't want you to think I was afraid of you."

"Why should I think you are afraid of me? You knocked me out with a single blow of your fist. You're so much bigger and stronger than I, Colbert. Why should you be afraid?"

"Won't you all come in?" Salomon said.

"What about Henrietta?" Jeremiah asked.

"She's all right again. I think she won't like it if you don't come in."

He opened the door. Henrietta was sitting on the chair, a cushion at her back and her legs on the box. The sun shone upon her and there was the smell of wet diapers, which Salomon had hung up on a wire. The cradle stood in the middle of the room, and the boxes and other pieces of furniture were so far away from it that it seemed to be the only object in the house.

Jeremiah held out both hands to Henrietta. She pressed them tightly, and he saw that she had tears in her eyes. He gazed at her with his quiet smile. "I'm so glad for you, Henrietta," he said. "For you and Salomon."

She did not answer. Slowly she released his hands and invited the others to sit down. She excused herself for not being able to leave the room while the men conferred.

"We have no secrets," Jeremiah said. . . . "Don't you want to let me read the letter you've brought for me?"

Colbert sat on a box and stared into space. Stuebner twisted his black hat in his hand. He cleared his throat as though to speak, but he did not say anything.

Salomon went over to the stove and began to warm soup for Jeremiah. The smell of burning wood rose into the air, and a thin, bluish smoke filled the room.

"Is it so hard?" Jeremiah asked. "Isn't it very simple to stretch out your hand and give someone a letter that you haven't even written yourself? One that bears the name of a community—which means it's practically nameless? Does it take any more than a little gesture that any child can make?"

"Look here, Jeremiah," Colbert said, and he began to tear the letter into little pieces. "I'm no letter carrier. I've come here because I want to tell you that we don't want you here. We want you to leave as soon as possible. We've written to Salt Lake and explained. Maybe they can use you there. We don't want you here."

Slowly the bits of paper fluttered to the ground. They settled silently, square spots of white on the floor.

"And you make a decision without giving me a chance to reply."

"You have the right to appeal," Stuebner said.

"Was everyone present—did you have a quorum?" Salomon asked.

"That doesn't matter," Jeremiah whispered almost inaudibly. He noticed that his lips were beginning to bleed again. He was slightly dizzy from hunger. He leaned against the crude table Salomon had made.

All sat silent and gazed at him. He went on:

"You are the Saints of the Latter Day of Jesus Christ and I, Jeremiah Kentrup, have led you up here in His name and by His command, because He destined this land for you. Neither you, Stuebner, nor you, Colbert, nor the whole community can take away from me the weight and the burden of the commandment laid upon me. You cannot come and say, 'Go, Jeremiah, we no longer want you,' for then you sin against His will. And I cannot come before you and plead for myself, for then I would be disobedient to His will. We are forged together by His Law, and His Law alone can sunder us. Amen."

"And how can you prove the commandment of the Lord?" Stuebner asked spitefully.

"To you I cannot prove it. Can one prove to a blind man that the sky is blue?"

"Then you won't go?" Colbert asked.

"I would like to go," Jeremiah replied. "I don't feel myself strong enough for all of you. My words are crude, not subtle enough for your

stony ears. And since you knocked my teeth out it's even harder for me. Now you will all laugh at me. How can God be in such a man, you will think. . . . But I am staying; yes, I am staying."

Colbert got up. With the tip of his wooden shoe he kicked one of the squares of paper on the floor.

"Look here, preacher," he said, "this is a deadly serious matter. It isn't a matter of words and opinions, but of the very life of all of us. Our settlement is at stake, and the bread our kids will or won't have this winter. I think that's something very real and not something to joke about. I can't throw you out of the house here if Salomon wants to keep you. But if you or anyone else does anything without the consent of all of us. I'll beat you up so you'll never stand again. I think that's clear enough and man to man. That's all there is to it."

Heavily, his shoes clicking, he walked to the door. He turned and looked straight into Jeremiah's eyes, and he wondered when he saw that even in this battered face the old smile was still recognizable.

There was a smell of vegetables and cabbage and potatoes and milk in the room. The wind hummed in the fire and the wood crackled in the flames.

As Colbert put his hand on the door latch, he stood still again for a moment. "My wife wants to know how the boy is," he said, "and whether you can use some of the clothes we still have from ours."

"It's kind of your wife," Henrietta said after a moment. "Very kind. Maybe later on some time . . ."

Colbert still stood for a moment, as though waiting for Jeremiah to say something. Then he and Stuebner stepped over the threshold, and noiselessly closed the door behind them.

After Jeremiah had eaten, he stretched out on the floor because he could no longer hold himself erect. Salomon went out to work and Henrietta sat on her chair with closed eyes. The baby slept and the cat rubbed its back against the cradle. In the shadows at the side of the house hens cackled. It was hot.

Jeremiah did not awaken until Salomon and Henrietta had finished their supper. For a while he remained lying still with half-closed eyes.

The small candle was burning and illuminated Salomon's big hand, which was closed tightly around Henrietta's fingers. The two did not speak. Jeremiah could not see their eyes, but from the position of their heads he knew that they were gazing at each other. Between them stood the cradle. The only sound was the wind at the windows.

"Salomon," Jeremiah said, "will you please help me get up? I want to go to my room and go back to sleep. I can't get enough sleep."

"Don't you want something to eat?" Henrietta asked, withdrawing her fingers from Salomon's hand.

"All I want is to sleep," Jeremiah said. "For two days and a night I've done nothing else. I ought to be ashamed of myself. I've scarcely looked at little Jeremiah."

Salomon helped him to his feet. They went over to the cradle.

"You ought to see him when he's awake," Henrietta said. "He has big, surprised eyes. And his skin is sort of brownish. And real fingernails already."

"It's good having a baby, awfully good," Salomon whispered, looking at Henrietta.

"It's always a miracle, every time," Jeremiah replied, also whispering. "They say there aren't miracles any more, and yet they happen every day before our eyes."

With his raw hand he stroked the sleeping baby's head. The hair was soft and silken and the skin felt warm and vital and a little moist.

Salomon accompanied him to the door of his room.

"Don't you think it's a sign that everything will turn out well, that a baby is born just now?" Henrietta asked.

She could not see Jeremiah because he stood in the shadowy part of the room. But she heard him turning slowly and heavily to face her. Then she saw his face and his neck, like a splash of light in the gloom. He took a deep breath that sounded like a groan. It was as though he was filling his lungs in order to cry out. But the air flowed inaudibly out of his lungs again, and the room became so quiet that they could hear the breathing of the sleeping baby.

"I swear to you," he said slowly, "I swear to you that I know it. All will be well. So help me God."

When the door closed behind him, Salomon and Henrietta went to bed.

The following morning, when the sun had dried the dew from the meadow, Jeremiah set the hay on fire.

He knew that he had to do it. He had not spoken of it even to Salomon. Before he left, he had sat with Henrietta and the baby for a few minutes. He had taken the child in his arms and gazed at it soberly with his big blue eyes. Then he had carefully put it back in its cradle, given Henrietta a kiss on the forehead, as he sometimes did, and left.

The first flames ran low along the ground. They settled on single stalks, and dangled over them like jagged yellow ribbons. They did not seem to touch the hay, but rather to hover over it in the air. They made a hissing sound, and the stems and blades leaned away when the first flames touched them. But after that they lay quiet and submissive.

Jeremiah held a stick. Wherever the hay lay too thickly, he loosened it. His arms still pained. But at least he could use them again. Only his hands really ached badly now.

Smoke began to rise. At first it was only a shimmering wave of air, but after a while it became distinct, bluish smoke. A scorched smell rose into the air.

The first locusts burned. It happened so fast it was hard to watch. A tongue of flames reached out for one. It singed legs and wings; the abdomen twitched a few times, and then there was nothing left of the insect.

The fire began to climb the hill. But the locusts climbed, too. Now they began to flee. No doubt about it. They ran and hopped and flew before the flames. The warmth streamed upward and they could not help feeling it. They must know that the flames were behind them. Their uneasiness was mutually infectious. Those from below joined those that dwelt farther up. They crowded together. Groups of ten or twenty swelled to masses of hundreds. They rubbed their bodies against one another. Those from behind clambered over those in front. And always they were ahead of the flames.

The meadow is burning too slowly, Jeremiah thought. With his stick he poked among the flames. He tried to give them more air. As well as he could with his aching arms, he threw burning clumps of hay ahead, in order to enclose the locusts in a circle of flame. He tried to walk through the flames, thinking that then he could get ahead of the locusts and drive them into the fire. But his legs were too slow and his trousers caught fire. With his sore hands he beat it out.

His eyes watered. The flames had grown. They were nearly half his height now. They had reached both margins of the meadow. The smoke that poured up grew thicker and thicker. And thicker grew the swarms of locusts that were fleeing before the flames. Many of them were in the air now. Not high, just a little higher than the flames. They seemed unable to stay aloft very long, for they always landed again a little distance up the hill.

Even so, many of them were surprised by the fire. Here and there one would suddenly sit motionless, stretch its legs convulsively upward, try to spread its wings, and then—a wingless and legless stub—it would shrivel.

But most of them kept ahead of the flames. Jeremiah ran to the woods. He circled the fire and advanced toward the fleeing swarm of locusts. He felt thousands of them being crushed under his feet. They crawled up along his pants. They settled on his hands. He knocked them off with his stick. He destroyed hundreds of them, but the others continued to mount the slope.

And even though they were fleeing, they stopped in mid-flight to eat. Even while they ran for their lives, they devoured whatever they could. Greedily they fell upon leaves and flowers. They almost crushed one another to death, and always there were more of them, more every minute.

And every minute the flames ascended farther up the meadow. If the locusts reached the unmown swath, they would be safe. The fresh grass would not burn, and the fire would die at the edge of it. They would creep into the daisies and the quaking grass and the yarrow; they would cluster on the stems and the plants would break under their weight. In a moment they would gobble up the small patch that Jeremiah's scythe had spared. Beyond would be the ditch with its blackberry bushes and nettles and half-rotted leaves. And a little farther on was the road. The road with its small stones and reddish sand and the wheel ruts where a few blades of grass grew in the spring. And then? Then came the potatoes. They were beginning to flower now. Around each plant were the hills of loose earth that the farmers had hoed up in hours of labour. So that the roots would get more air, so that they would not smother in the hard, parched earth. And then . . . and then . . .

What could he, Jeremiah, do to stop them? Was there no way to speed the flames? "O Lord, my God," he whispered, and clenched his fists. He went back to the meadow. He stood so close behind the flames that his legs were seared. He had to take a step backward. He coughed. Tears flowed from his eyes. The flames were so thick now that he could no longer see what was happening on the other side. Where the fire had passed, the ground was black and grey, and here and there it still glowed. It was so hot that Jeremiah could feel it through the soles of his shoes. Perhaps grass would never grow here again. Perhaps he had destroyed the meadow and not the locusts. Would they have to reseed it?

Again Jeremiah followed the flames so closely that he could not bear the heat. He seemed to be trying to press the fire forward with his own body.

Smoke stood above the meadow like a stone wall. All the air shimmered. It seemed to have become liquid and the waves billowed.

When the fire reached the level of the stone outcropping, the first gust of wind came. It came from the side.

The flames bowed. They grew smaller. Their hissing changed to a spitting. It was a deep, hoarse sound. Like some predatory creature showing its teeth. On the forest side the fire began to leap faster. "O Lord, my God, I thank you," Jeremiah said to himself, and went toward that side to see the result. He wanted to see it with his own eyes. To see the flames fall upon the locusts, upon the swarms and heaps of them, upon the gluey conglomeration of kicking, crawling, gnawing bodies. He wanted to hear, to hear the flames of the Lord hissing as they devoured the plague, to hear the sound of burning mandibles and the popping of the soft abdomens. And finally to see that nothing remained of them but black ash that the wind could waft away.

When Jeremiah reached the edge of the woods, he saw that the flames had already eaten a big triangle into this side of the meadow. It was as

though the fire was trying to surround the locusts. In a moment it was no longer a narrow tongue of fire; the whole meadow was burning on this side.

Jeremiah climbed higher along the blackberry bushes. He wanted to see from above what the locusts were doing. His lips were tightly compressed. He felt that this was the decisive moment. Were they faster than the fire? Could they save themselves?

Yes, yes—they were faster. Where the flames were approaching them and crawling was no longer sufficient, they hopped. And worse yet, they were in the air. Everywhere at once. Everywhere. Everywhere.

Jeremiah went back again. When he stepped out on the burned meadow once more, he saw that he was no longer alone. Judith was standing there, and Julie, and the Colbert children. They stared into the flames with wide, astonished eyes. They said something to one another that Jeremiah lost in the roar of the fire.

Judith went up to him.

"Did you do this?" she asked.

"I am the instrument of the Lord," Jeremiah said.

"And what are we to feed the cows?"

"What will you feed yourselves if you don't destroy the locusts?"

"Are you destroying them?"

"Yes, I am destroying them," Jeremiah replied, and looked smilingly at Judith. "Or perhaps I am only driving them away. How shall I know the plans of the Lord, who am only His instrument? And what does it matter to you, who want to see only the result?"

"I think you're mad, Jeremiah," Judith said softly.

"Won't you stay here beside me until it is all done? Don't you want to see God's miracle at first hand, sister? Don't you want to be one of those who can proclaim that they saw it themselves, with their own eyes?"

When he took a step forward, she followed him. She felt the heat upon her flesh, but she could not turn her eyes from the flames.

"They will kill you, Jeremiah," she said.

"No one will kill me until this is finished. Who will dare to raise a hand against me? Who will dare to touch me so long as the Lord's hand is upon me?"

Farmers began coming up the meadow. They did not know yet what was happening. Had Jeremiah set the fire? Would it destroy the locusts?

But those coming down from the road shook their heads. No, the locusts were fleeing. They were faster than the flames. Much, much faster. With their long legs. And with their wings. And their cunning. And their diabolic intelligence. For they smelled the fire long before it reached them. And they did not wait. They knew that the whole world was not burning. They fled toward where the wind blew fresh.

The farmers saw Judith and Jeremiah marching slowly behind the

flames. They could not make out Jeremiah's face, but he seemed different, unlike himself. His face and hair were like a glowing ball in the swaths of smoke that ascended from the meadow.

What would he be talking about with Judith Neill? Strange that a daughter thought so little of her dead father that . . . Oh, well, that was her business. But this of the meadow was *their* business. Maybe the preacher was really so crazy that he had set fire to the meadow. As though he hadn't had enough, getting his teeth knocked out. If only Colbert and Stuebner would get here, so that they could do something.

Judith looked at the others. She wondered why they did nothing. They followed slowly along the border of the meadow, behind the flames, and she could not make out their faces. They were dark figures, no more than small and big shadows in the heat and the smoke and the horror that was happening here.

A swarm of locusts appeared above the flames. Like a darker cloud they hung in the midst of the smoke, a cloud composed of a thousand fluttering dots.

Judith grasped Jeremiah's arm. "Look," she whispered, "look. There, and there, and there. They're flying in the air. They're settling on the healthy fields. That's what you've done, Jeremiah. That. You're mad. You're the devil himself. That's what father said about you. Yes, yes, he said it. That you're the devil."

She began to scream. Her voice sounded above the fire and reached the others on the rim of the meadow.

They stood still. They could not make out any words. But they heard the screams. They seemed to come from within the fire. As though someone were burning alive. Or was it only the flames screaming? Perhaps it was really only the flames and the wind.

Jeremiah did not seem to hear. On his swollen face lay a thin layer of soot, through which drops of sweat drew white lines. His eyes were wide open and their expression was so gentle and childlike that Judith fell silent when she saw them, and removed her hand from his arm. No, no—he was not the devil. But he was mad. A fool of God, but still a fool.

The flames paused. They had met those coming from the side. The two fires flowed together, melted and ran, mingled and became a single current.

Jeremiah did not stir. Motionless, he watched as the flames grew smaller. Now and then they would flicker up once more to their maximum height. But afterward they would sink even lower. The smoke became thicker and sharper, and the shadow over the meadow was darker. The sun was only a bright circle and it was possible to look straight into it.

The heat was intolerable. Like a thousand needles it pricked the cheeks and eyelids and penetrated every smallest break in the skin.

The wound on Jeremiah's lip burst again and the blood trickled down over his chin. He brushed it away with his sleeve, unaware that he was doing so.

He was also unaware that Colbert had come up at his side, and he did not notice that Judith had gone away. Through the tiny openings that sometimes formed among the flames he tried to see what was happening. He wanted to see what the ground looked like where the fire was still burning. Should not the ashen remains of the locusts be heaped there? And should not their charred fatty parts that had not burned be covering the ground thickly?

"Kentrup," Colbert said. He put his hand on Jeremiah's shoulder.

"What do you want?" Jeremiah asked.

"What are you waiting for?"

Jeremiah turned his eyes and gazed blankly at Colbert. "What am I waiting for?" He looked back at the flames. Then he grasped Colbert's arm. "Don't you want to see it, too, brother? Don't you want to see their remains lying there? A heap of dust that the wind will blow away from our fields. His wind and His fire have destroyed them. This was what He promised me. Did you believe He would fail to keep a promise?"

Colbert said nothing. He was sweating heavily. He put his hands in his pockets and rubbed his wet fingers together. They were unpleasantly slippery. He wrinkled his brow. The time had come to get rid of Jeremiah once and for all. He must get out of the settlement or else they would have to lock him up. He was a madman. Believed what he said, all right, because he fooled himself. A dreamer. But they couldn't do with him if they were going to settle on this land. A man had to have a hard, clear head. And if he was a preacher, his business was worrying about God, not about locusts. That was the men's affair, and the men had decided that nothing could be done. After all, they might have had a little of the meadow left in the fall, and a little wheat and barley and some vegetables. There was no sense destroying fine hay when it was no use. The men had decided that. And how could it be any use when no man had ever fought these things successfully? A plague was a plague, and you didn't make it any better by opposing it. . . . That was clear, and even the children understood it after you explained it to them once.

"Look, Colbert," Jeremiah began again, without looking away from the fire. "Here I am standing beside you and you can knock me into the flames with a single blow, so that I would never get up again. With a single blow. All you need do is take that big fist of yours out of your pocket. Why don't you do it, Colbert?"

Colbert did not answer. He stared into the shrinking flames. And he rubbed his fingers together without pause, because they were so repulsively slippery.

Jeremiah continued speaking. His words were low and hard to under-

stand, and he broke off frequently to cough. His eyes were full of water. It gathered in the corners near his nose and dripped down along his cheeks into his beard.

"You're big and strong, Colbert. With your fist you could knock down an ox. But you know that if you struck me, there would no longer be anyone to speak with God for you. No one to whom He would give His signs. No one who knows what He wishes. You're an awfully reasonable man, Colbert. After all, what has a preacher to do in a farmers' settlement? Ought to tend to his own affairs, oughtn't he? Praying and that sort of thing. Baptizing you when you're mature and burying you when you die. But what has a preacher to do with locusts? That's what you're thinking, aren't you, Colbert?"

Colbert brushed his outspread fingers over his face. He licked his dry lips to moisten them. He cleared his throat and twisted his neck around inside his collar.

Meanwhile the others had come up to them. They stood on the burned stubble surrounded by a bluish fog from all the puffs of smoke that still rose from the charred remains. They bent their heads forward the better to hear what Colbert and Jeremiah were saying. But they heard little because the hissing of the flames drowned out their low-voiced conversation.

The first cry seemed to come from the flames. Then, suddenly, it was above them. It hovered in the air, and the meadow still vibrated with its sound long after it had died.

They listened with open mouths and heads uplifted. They gazed at one another wide-eyed, the memory of the uncannily similar scene a few days before chilling their hearts. The smoke was a streaming dark cloud, and high above it had a ceiling. From the ground where they stood puffs of smoke still rose and here and there, where a leaf or a stalk had completely dried out, a flame darted up.

They looked at each other and then watched the backs of the two men in front of them. Jeremiah did not move. His arms hung at his side, his palms were turned outward and his knees slightly bent. Colbert seemed to have withdrawn his head into his neck.

Again came the cry. This time it was like mocking laughter. It began with a high, shrill scream and gradually sank down the scale. The pitch went lower and lower and finally the sound faded out, as though it had passed beyond the range of hearing.

For a moment there was a deep silence.

Then Jeremiah said in a calm, clear voice:

"Why are you standing still? Don't you want to look to Stuebner?"

"Stuebner?" Colbert asked, as though awakening from a dream.

"Don't you recognize his voice?" Jeremiah asked. "Or did you think his cries were God's own voice?"

They stood indecisive for a moment, looking at one another. Then

Colbert began to run along behind the fire to the edge of the woods, and the others followed him.

But before they came to the trees, a gust of wind parted the smoke over the fire. It was a very ordinary gust of wind, the kind that often came up from the valley in the afternoons even when the wind was still.

Fuller was the first to look through the gap in the smoke and see the horror. He clutched at Colbert's sleeve and opened his mouth as if to scream. Colbert stood still in mid-stride. Then they all stopped. Each man touched his neighbour's arm and held his breath.

When Jeremiah saw it, a low moan of pain came from his lips. He brushed his hand over his eyes. For a moment he let the back of his hand rest on his brow, then he dropped his arms again and let them hang slack as usual.

The horrible sight they saw was the locusts. The locusts clinging in a mass to a black figure that lay up above on the road; locusts filling the air above the unowned part of the meadow, above the ditch by the road, above the road itself and above the potato field. Perhaps above everything.

Colbert recovered first. He began to run at full speed. Stories he had heard in childhood came to his mind: stories of peasants who were eaten alive by locusts.

Jeremiah followed him, and then came the others. They said nothing. They climbed the hill, unaware of the thorns of the blackberry bushes and the nettles, not even aware of the locusts which sat everywhere now, devouring the fern and the huckleberry leaves and even the layer of moss that clung like dust to the bark of the trees.

"Come home with me, Jeremiah," Salomon said suddenly, appearing at his side.

"No, no—not now. I am staying with the locusts until God's Word has been fulfilled. They can't keep me away without killing me."

Salomon shrugged. "Do you know what that is lying up there?"

"Stuebner?"

Salomon nodded. He grasped Jeremiah's arm. "Listen," he said, "I can't protect you now. If they beat you down like a mad dog—there's nothing I can do about it. I'm alone. You know I have a child. But I have my home—that's something else. They won't dare to break into my house."

Jeremiah smiled. He shook Salomon's hand from his arm. "You don't have to worry about me," he said. "What does it matter if they beat me? I don't even have any teeth to lose. But if God wills, I'll get up after a few hours and then I'll crawl on all fours behind the locusts, if I can't walk. For I will be there, Salomon, when the miracle happens. It has been promised to me; my pleas will be granted and my eyes shall see. Do you understand that?"

The men were carrying Stuebner along the border of the potato field. As Jeremiah stepped up to them, they were taking the unconscious man's coat off. His narrow chest with its prominent ribs beneath a yellowish skin came to view. His eyes were closed and his hands clenched, as always when he had one of his attacks. Whenever it happened and they were near, they usually placed a cloth between his fingers to prevent him from breaking his thumbs. They did not know the reason, but the women had said it was better that way.

Colbert ran his hand inside Stuebner's shirt and brought out a handful of locusts. Their heads and legs showed between his fingers, and when he crushed them the juice of their guts ran over his fingers. He crushed them all before he opened his hand. There was nothing better to destroy them than a human hand. It was an instrument like any other, though there were many more things it could do. When he felt that only a gummy mass was left of them, a mixture of gut, legs, wings and fragments of their armour, he opened his fingers, spread them wide apart and rubbed them on the ground to clean them. The sand made his skin dry and smooth, and then he reached into Stuebner's shirt again.

"Nice clean work," Colbert said when he saw Jeremiah.

"You're a madman," Fuller whispered hoarsely, and spat.

"A criminal!" someone cried, waving his hands in the air to fend off the locusts.

"Don't you see . . ." Jeremiah began.

"Shut up," Colbert interrupted. "Don't you realize yet what you've done, you idiot? Don't you realize that it's all over, that talk won't do any good now? We're done for, do you get it, done for! Isn't this enough for you? Don't you know the locusts are going to eat up everything we've got, if they don't eat us alive? Do you want me to call one of my kids to tell you that it was your crazy fire that made all the single locusts into a wild swarm?"

"And he stood there praying to the flames!" Judith cried. "And I thought it was really God's work and the beasts would be destroyed, and I prayed the way I've never prayed in my life and inwardly I asked his forgiveness. Him, I asked him to forgive me. Him . . ." She laughed hysterically. "What a joke. I asked him for forgiveness. What a world!"

"Why don't we knock that smile off his face?" asked a small man with a scar on his forehead.

"Because he still has his devil's spell on us," another cried.

"Of course he has his spell on you," Judith shrieked. "He put it on me, too. With laying his hand on your head and that sort of thing. Till it bewitches you. That's what he's doing to you, bewitching you. Making idiots of you."

The whole scene seemed so unreal to Jeremiah that he scarcely understood her. The sound of her words came to his ear and the vibrations set

his eardrums in motion, but afterward there was a hollow, empty space filled with a rustling noise, and all the sounds of the outer world were lost in this rustling.

He saw that the locusts had already eaten bare the unmown part of the meadow. Countless numbers of them were squatting in the remains; others were crawling across the road. They tumbled over small stones, slid down into the wagon ruts, scurried along twigs that the wind whirled around, clambered over the men's shoes and vanished finally into the furrows of the potato field.

"Say something!" Colbert roared at him.

"What can I say to unbelievers?" Jeremiah whispered. "Where are the words that are strong enough to heal sick souls? How can I convince you of anything when you are resolved to believe only what you see with your own eyes?"

"Why do you have to talk so much if what you say is true?" Fuller asked. "Tell us now, preacher, what your God intends to do with us. We won't faint right off to hear it. I won't, at any rate. And you know that I'm staying up here with the locusts or without them and with the Latter-day Saints or alone. So you can talk with me. What does He say, your God?"

They saw that Jeremiah had turned deathly pale. His lips had a bluish cast and he seemed to be swaying slightly from side to side. The others looked at him under half-closed lids. Fuller alone looked him straight in the face.

Fuller's jaw was thrust forward and his broad, good-natured face was mocking. In the folds at the corners of his eyes a smile hovered, and at the same time there was anxiety in his gaze.

Jeremiah took a step toward him. He laid his hand on Fuller's shoulder.

"You're a poor devil, Fuller," he said.

"Tell him to take his hand away!" Judith screamed. "He'll put his spell on you. He'll take away your common sense, Fuller."

"He won't make a fool of me so easily," Fuller said, and spat to one side. "But he still owes me an answer. Well, Jeremiah, what does He say, your God?"

The smell of burning hay was still in the air, and the locusts were still crawling across the road. Stuebner had not yet recovered consciousness, and Colbert still sat beside him crushing insects between his fingers. The men were standing in small groups on the road, every now and then scraping their feet on the ground to reduce a heap of locusts to pulp.

But the men were somehow changed, different from what they had been when they first came up the road. They had become as weary as the air around them. The wind had died almost completely and the air was sultry. Their arms hung heavy and the veins on the backs of their hands had thickened.

It was a damned stinking business, this whole thing. It wouldn't have been half so bad if they had not doubted Jeremiah. They had had worse experiences before, but at least then they had known they were on the right road. Then they hadn't had preachers who might be madmen or swindlers. When their preachers had said God wants this or that, that was all there was to it. But who could tell whether it was the same with Jeremiah?

They were too weary to think about it all. Too late, anyway. The devil was on the spot to fetch them. Would have been better to turn prospector. Then you depended on yourself. If things went wrong, they went wrong. Or having a farm alone, that was still better. If you starved, you starved for yourself. Never had been right anyway, the way the work was divided up. It wasn't fair that a fellow like Stuebner got as much to eat as Colbert. It would be only fair if now . . .

They yawned. A glass of whisky wouldn't be a bad idea. Were the wagons still in good shape? They would take away less than they had brought. But they couldn't break up. No, that didn't go—alone each man was too weak. Beggar's choice that kept them together. Oh, well, maybe it was more. Maybe.

Be a good idea to flop down somewhere and sleep it off. Did the women know already about this mess? Wouldn't be easy to tell them all about it. Yes, of course, they had been right again, the women. They had always said it was a crazy place to settle. Idiots they were for not listening. Where were the women now? Would be better if they had seen the smoke themselves and knew what was happening here. . . .

"He's waking up," Colbert said suddenly, breaking the silence. They saw Stuebner's eyelids quiver. After a while he opened his eyes.

"I guess they scared you plenty, the locusts," Colbert said.

Stuebner lay motionless. The tight cramp in his limbs had relaxed. He had opened his hands, and his ashen skin had taken on its familiar hue.

He opened his mouth. His sharp little teeth were visible. "Locusts?" he asked.

Colbert nodded. The others stepped closer. They wanted to hear what Stuebner had felt when the insects fell upon him.

They left Jeremiah standing alone in the middle of the road. His hand was still raised as though it lay on Fuller's shoulder. They had asked him, "What does your God say?" He had not answered. It might be a mocking question, but it was a just one. If Fuller had said "our God," he might have been able to answer sooner. But it was too easy for him to judge them, for he needed no mediator; he spoke directly with God.

Jeremiah had not noticed that Stuebner had come to.

"You ask me what He says, our God," he began.

When Stuebner heard his voice, he sat up. "Isn't that Jeremiah?" he asked in a whisper.

"His voice is so crystal-clear," Jeremiah continued. "But my words are so poor and weak."

"Shut your mouth!" Stuebner screamed. "For God's sake, why do you let him go on talking? Won't you twist the devil's neck at last?" His mouth remained open for a moment. He seemed to have just noticed that in spite of Colbert's patient efforts, there were still locusts on his body. He shuddered with horror. His hand made a snatching movement at his chest. Then he bent his arm around his shoulder to pluck them from his back. His other hand darted into his trousers, then up to his collar.

"They're all over me," he wailed. "I can feel their cursed legs. I feel them everywhere. I'll never get rid of them. They'll eat me alive. As I prophesied."

Again he waved his arms wildly. His hand darted into his shirt again and with the tips of his fingers he pulled out a kicking locust. He did not crush it as Colbert had done. He bent over and pushed it under the heel of his shoe.

Gradually he grew more and more excited. His face was flushed, his forehead sweating, and he seemed scarcely able to breathe. His movements became more sudden and violent. His whole body itched. He closed his hand over parts of his body where all the locusts were gone. He thought the drops of sweat that trickled down his face and tickled him were locusts. He scraped his cheeks with damp fingers. He brushed his arm over his hair. He rolled up his trousers. Finally Colbert could stand it no longer.

"Stop it!" he shouted at Stuebner.

Stuebner stopped short in the middle of a movement. His arms dropped. He pillowed his head in his hands, burying his face in his palms and clutching his hair with his fingers. Now and then a tremor passed through his body, as though he was remembering his experience.

The swarms of locusts that were crossing the road thinned out. They were still coming, but it was only a slow trickle. The main streams were now in the furrows of the field. They were in the air over the potato plants, and everywhere else.

Jeremiah had to follow them. He would lose any chance to control them if he did not. He must not let them alone. Perhaps he could change the direction of the current. Perhaps his prayer could prevent them from falling upon the last of the crops. Perhaps his presence alone, his proximity, was enough to make them go another way. Perhaps he could close the sluice at the brook and flood the fields, thus saving the other side.

"Won't you forget for a moment that I'm your preacher?" he asked, "Won't you imagine for a moment that I have my ideas about what to do against the locusts from a book, not from God? Imagine I had

a printed pamphlet from the shipping company that read, 'How to Fight Locusts.' Wouldn't you believe me then, wouldn't you give me a chance to finish what I've begun?"

"But you don't have it from a book," Colbert cried.

"And suppose I tell you I've lied? That I wanted to make myself important and all the things I've been doing I read in a little pamphlet that the railroad company gives out? It didn't come from God, but from the Kansas Pacific."

They gazed at him wide-eyed and ran their tongues over their dry lips. They loosened their tight collars. Several of the men cleared throats.

"No one'll believe your new trick, Jeremiah," Judith said. "What did you make up all these stories for, if it's as simple as that? All you had to do was say, 'I got it from the railroad company.' Probably nobody would have said a word against it. Everybody would have been glad that somebody knew what to do. No, Jeremiah. It's your idea and the devil put it into you. Otherwise you would have told us long ago."

"It was a pamphlet with a red binding," Jeremiah continued. "Don't you remember seeing it, Colbert? The directions were on the second page. Don't you remember?"

He gazed questioningly at Colbert. The silence was so deep that Jeremiah was sure they could not help hearing the restless thumping of his heart. He tried to slow the quickening tempo of his breathing. What a frightful thing I'm doing, he thought. Denying Him and replacing Him with a railroad company. Maybe they're right and the devil really has me in his clutches.

Colbert shook his head. "I never saw any red-covered pamphlet," he said. "Get the hell out of here, Jeremiah. I feel sick when I look at you."

"Go on, get out," Fuller said, shoving him lightly. "Find another place to stay. There are plenty of fools you can talk to about God or the railroad company, whichever is handier."

"We ought to twist his neck for him," someone said.

"String him up," a man at the back cried.

"He deserves to be burned," Stuebner snarled, getting up.

"No one is going to lay a hand on him," Colbert said stolidly. "We have enough troubles already. We're not going to add a crime to them."

He turned to Jeremiah. "You have one hour to leave the settlement. The whole wide world is before you. You can go wherever you please and take with you what belongs to you."

"And suppose I stay?" Jeremiah asked.

"Then I'll chain you until we have a chance to get you out of here."

Women and children were coming up the hill. Judith approached them, and the women closed around her. Their voices could be heard, but the words were indistinguishable. Farther down in the valley smoke

rose from chimneys. Near by was the green foliage of a small patch of woodland, and off in the distance were the shimmering bluish mountains.

Without another word, Jeremiah ran past Colbert into the potato field. His feet were heavy and his shoes dragged on the ground. He ran with his right shoulder thrust forward. The reviving wind came from the side. The dust tossed up by his shoes puffed back of him and then settled down on the potato plants, turning their leaves a sandy grey. He trampled the small clumps of earth around the vines; they crackled as they broke. A few yards within the patch he came among the thickest stream of locusts.

They had chosen the footwalks among the precise, straight rows of plants for their path. They crawled and hopped, and sometimes they flew a little way. They were upon and beside and behind one another. Sometimes they sat still for a moment to devour hurriedly a small weed growing in the path. First one would clamber up the stem, then another and another. Finally the weed would bow down under their weight, and a few seconds later nothing was left of it but the woody base of the stem, which scarcely projected above the earth. But they did not touch the potato leaves.

Jeremiah walked slowly now, as slowly as he could. They had given him an hour. Perhaps his miracle would happen in that time. Perhaps he would be here, after all, to see it with his own eyes. Perhaps He would understand why he had said that about the railroad company.

The others followed him. They would not let him out of sight. They were far enough behind so that he could not make out their conversation. But sometimes they called out the time to him. "Fifty-five minutes . . . forty-five minutes to go." And sometimes came angry cries like, "Where is your baggage, Jeremiah?" A woman cried several times, "Locust Messiah."

But he was alone. Salomon had gone home, unable to stand it any longer. After all, Jeremiah must realize that he had Henrietta and the baby; he had already done more for Jeremiah than he could justify. You couldn't stake your whole existence on a thing like this. Not when you had a family to think of. But still it was a hell of a business. He wished he could lie down somewhere in a dark corner and go to sleep. If only he knew how he was going to tell Henrietta about it. She would gaze at him quietly and then she would say something or do something. But what it would be Salomon couldn't imagine.

When the locusts reached the beans and tomatoes, they mingled with those that had been born in the vegetable garden. Suddenly they were beside them and on top of them. They enclosed them in their groups. They rubbed their crawling bodies against them. They stepped on their wings and on their heads. The brown juice from their mouths mingled on the stems of the plants. Their excrement flowed together. The current

swept along the locusts that until now had been peacefully feeding on beans and tomato plants.

Jeremiah felt the wind abating as he descended farther into the valley. They had given him a single hour. It was a horribly short time for a miracle. They meant it, about locking him up. They would just dispose of him by keeping him out of sight. The way criminals were disposed of. And then it would be all over. Then they would really starve next winter.

The locusts were gradually approaching the brook. There was not much water in it. But still, there was enough to flood over the banks in a few minutes. The water would run among the vegetables, in the paths. At first it would dry up because the ground was so parched. But after a while a pool would form on both sides. It would rise slowly and broaden out. The locusts would drown by the thousands. The current of the brook would carry them away.

Jeremiah began walking faster. He must get to the sluice before the others. He must close the gate, and then he must make sure it stayed closed. For a while at least. He would have to defend it. He picked up a heavy stick of wood that lay in the furrow. Even if they overwhelmed him, he must cling to the sluice gate with all his might. Let them do what they would, he must not release it.

He had increased the distance between himself and the others. He had even caught up to the locusts. Now he was abreast of the first of them. Here the settlers had planted lettuce and spinach. A natural ridge led down to the stream on both sides of the sluice. If he had time he could turn the whole floor of the valley into a lake six or eight feet deep. But even one foot would be enough. If only he had time. It would not harm the vegetables, for they could let the water drain off and the sun would soon dry the ground. But the locusts would be destroyed. Not one of them would remain.

The sluice was little more than a board with a handle on top. Two square blocks had been laid across the stream level with the ridge, and two boards were plunged into the water on either side. These were the guide rails along which the sluice was raised. When it was opened, a wedge was thrust between the blocks. It was as simple as that. Usually it took two to open it, because the water pressed against the board. Also, after a while the wood of the guide rails swelled and held the sluice tight. One man could close it easily, simply by knocking out the wedge. If necessary this could be done with the bare fist.

Jeremiah closed it. The water splashed as the board fell swiftly. He sat down at the foot of the ridge and waited. In the distance he saw the others slowly descending the hill. Sometimes the sound of their voices came to him. They must have reached the point where the stream of locusts was thickest. On the other side of the ridge the valley continued.

Here hazel-nut bushes and willows and reeds grew, and the earth was black and heavy. The farmers had not yet got around to cultivating it. It belonged to them, but because land they had not worked meant little to them they always considered the ridge as the border of the settlement. No one leaving the settlement would have thought of going across this boundary. After all, there was a road and it was insane to take any other path. But if the crazy preacher enjoyed crossing the ridge out of the settlement, that was his affair. Perhaps he wanted to take his wisdom to the Indians who, it was rumoured, sometimes hunted in the marshes beyond.

This was what the farmers were discussing as they followed Jeremiah. A little behind them came the women. They, too, had been talking along the same lines until Henrietta suddenly appeared. The children had seen her coming first. "Another crazy one," Mrs. Fuller said. "Actually coming along with the baby in her arms." "And Salomon himself is with her," Judith said scornfully. "Well, she knows why she's coming," Colbert's wife remarked, laughing softly. "Sh . . ." Rosy Neill said, glancing at Judith. "Oh, well, I didn't say anything," Mrs. Colbert apologized.

For a moment Salomon wondered whether he should remain with the women or go to the men. But Henrietta said, "Why don't you go ahead with the other men?" Salomon obeyed.

"Jeremiah has sat down on the ground by the sluice," Judith said. "Maybe he intends to wait out his time there."

"Who can tell what a madman will do?" Colbert's wife said.

"Don't worry about him; he'll find other fools to work on," Mrs. Fuller remarked.

"Perhaps we are the fools for driving him away," Henrietta said, without looking at the other women.

"I suppose you're sorry he's going?" Judith asked.

"It almost breaks my heart," Henrietta replied.

"A fine way for a married woman to talk," Colbert's wife said.

"You know how I mean it," Henrietta said defensively. "Many of you really think the same. But it's easier to run with the wolves. It's easier to yap than to speak gently. Isn't it, Judith?"

"I say what I please and what I think," Judith retorted angrily. "I don't know what you want of me. I hate this prophet of ours, I hate him more than most of you do."

"There are many who hate because they love," Henrietta said quietly.

"Haven't you had enough of this silly talk?" said Helen Neill.

The men in front of them began to walk faster. The women heard them calling out to Jeremiah, but at first they could not understand. They, too, went faster. Then, suddenly, they realized what the men were crying out.

"He closed the sluice, the devil," Colbert's wife spat. "He'll swamp the vegetables. He wants to take away the little we still have for food."

"Where, where?" Mrs. Fuller asked, peering, her hand over her eyes.

"Don't you see how the water has risen already?"

"Well, this time the men will finish with him."

"He's drowning the locusts," Henrietta said.

"They'll just wait to be drowned by the likes of him."

The women stood still. Only Henrietta continued running.

"Open the sluice," Colbert panted when he reached Jeremiah.

"No," Jeremiah said.

His feet were already in the water. But it was rising with such painful slowness. It was no more than a small puddle, and the surface was covered with a layer of dust. The earth seemed to swallow up most of it. The ground turned a dark brown. The small crumbs of soil dissolved. The water had not even reached the level of the first row of vegetables. As Colbert made to approach him, Jeremiah retreated a step. He took a tighter grip on the club he held in his hand.

"Don't touch me," he said softly. "Don't touch me, Colbert."

Colbert hesitated. He felt the water on his bare feet, inside his heavy wooden shoes. They were clumsy; he could not move easily. His hands were clenched. He stood motionless, observing Jeremiah's every movement. He did not want to knock him down, but he wanted to overpower him. And then open the sluice.

The water rose continually. It was already touching the stems of the plants at the base. It began to flow down the first bed on the other side. It trickled along in narrow, dusty tongues. It looked like some viscous fluid as it flowed in slow meanderings among and above the small lumps of earth. But the water that followed it ran faster. It coursed to the end of the trail the first had made, and then struck out on its own. When this stream dried away into the earth, a third and then a fourth followed. Slowly it rose in the furrow between the first and second rows.

A strong gust of wind swept through the valley.

"Kill him!" Stuebner cried. "The field's being swamped."

"Shut up," Salomon said.

"Why shut up?" Fuller asked. "I suppose you're in cahoots with that devil."

"Open the sluice," Colbert said, so softly that Jeremiah alone could understand his words. When Jeremiah did not move, he added, "I'll count three."

Again came a gust of wind. The water curled in delicate ripples and mounted the side of the second row.

"Jeremiah! Jeremiah!" It was Henrietta's voice.

Salomon recognized it and looked around. Jeremiah, too, lifted his head. At that moment Colbert sprang upon him.

The impact was so violent and unexpected that Jeremiah fell over backwards into the water. But even as he fell he was thrashing violently with his arms. He came to the surface again. Colbert, who had reached out for him, missed his grasp. Jeremiah clung now to the sluice. He threw his arms around the wooden piece that was nailed to the upper part of the board. He locked his hands together. The whole lower half of his body lay in the water. Water had stopped his ears. There was water in his eyes, and he spat water out of his mouth. But he clung to the sluice.

He waited for Colbert to attack and break his grip. He held his muscles so taut that they hurt. He tried to see and hear, but water kept running out of his hair into his eyes. He opened his mouth wide, thinking this would clear his hearing, but it did not help.

Colbert did not come near. Jeremiah tried to straighten up. He held on to the sluice, braced his feet against the muddy bed of the brook and pushed himself against the wood.

A hand touched him, and he let himself slide again.

"Get up, Jeremiah," Henrietta's voice said above him. She could scarcely speak for excitement.

"What is it?" he asked without moving.

"Get up. The miracle has come."

Dripping, Jeremiah approached the others. They did not speak as he passed through their circle. They shrank back from him, and the path they made was wider than necessary. Henrietta walked at his side. She was wet almost to the waist, but she did not notice.

At first only a few of the locusts had flown up into the air. Not many more than before. But they had flown higher. And a little farther. When the second gust of wind came, there were more of them. Perhaps a few hundred or a few thousand. It was this that had prompted Henrietta's first outcry.

The locusts are flying, she had thought. Dear God in heaven, they are flying. No, not as usual, but high up into the sky. So high that already they were almost out of sight.

She had waved and called. She had shouted like mad. She had begun to run toward the men. She must save Jeremiah, must protect him. The men would hurt him. Him and Salomon, if Salomon tried to help him.

The men had turned finally when they heard her cries.

Then they stood staring in amazement at the miracle. In greater and greater hosts, the locusts rose. They spread their wings, they fluttered a little, and the wind bore them farther down the valley. But then they

rose higher and higher. They became small black dots, and finally they flowed together into a transparent cloud. Then they vanished.

Faster and faster the swarms followed one another. Now there was one continual fluttering. Their wings gleamed in the sunlight. The clusters of locusts on the ground dissolved, shrank. Even while the ones on top still sat and were just spreading their wings, the ones below became impatient and began to crawl. They sought air. They wanted to rise into the wind. They climbed upon the smallest of elevations in order to take off more easily. And until the last moment they ate.

All of them departed in the same direction. The great swarm remained in sight for a long time. Finally it disappeared in the distance. The men's eyes hurt from intent gazing.

When they were all gone and nothing remained but the few wretched insects such as live in all fields and gardens, Jeremiah turned around and walked toward the ridge, with Henrietta at his side.

The men and women of the settlement stood motionless at first. Then they followed the two.

Colbert, who was almost as wet as Jeremiah, walked ahead. When he came abreast of Jeremiah, he doffed his hat.

"Can you forgive me, Jeremiah?" he asked.

"I have nothing to forgive. Why should you have believed my word? It was all so easy for me, because I knew."

"Shouldn't we hold a prayer of thanksgiving?"

"No," Jeremiah smiled. "I don't think He cares very much for such thanksgivings. But if you insist on it—can't it wait until the new preacher comes?"

"But you're not going to leave us?"

"You see, Colbert, it's a funny thing about me. Up here you've crossed the divide. God wants me among those who still need me. Among those who knock out my teeth because I know better; among those who don't know where to turn in their trouble and who are on the point of forgetting that He exists at all. He wants me in places where I must burn meadows in secret and close sluices to flood the land, and where in the end I must even lie to carry out God's will. Here you will not forget Him. And He is so infinitely kind that He forgives you for needing one of His miracles to bring you back into His path."

"But this is your land, after all, Jeremiah."

"My land is the whole earth."

When they came to the ridge, Jeremiah kissed Henrietta on the brow. He kissed the child also and shook hands with Salomon.

The others had remained behind. They stood like shadows at the foot of the hill, only their faces visible as bright spots.

"At least take my dry coat," Salomon said.

"Good. Give me it," Jeremiah agreed.

For a moment they stood facing each other in their light shirts. Then they shrugged their shoulders into the dark, heavy coats. Jeremiah's hands came only halfway out of the sleeves, which were too long for him. But he felt warm. And weary. He would spend the night under some tree near the ridge. He would be happy and calm.

Slowly he ascended the small hill. A great silhouette, he stood for a moment at the top. His beard shone and on his face was the old, the unchanging smile. As in blessing, he raised his hands.

"All is good," he said.

He disappeared over the brink.

For a while they listened to the receding sound of his footsteps. They did not look at one another. Then they turned and walked homeward across the fields. Henrietta's baby had fallen asleep.

2

THEY WANDER EAST

THE AIR ABOVE the earth was still. The shadows of leaves on the glaring ground were patches of black sprawled wearily on the sand. Their fringes were grey and smudged, as though ink had run. They folded over all the irregularities of the land, stretched across stones and sticks of wood, cowered on the grey tree roots that projected above the ground, and sometimes they flowed together and became puddles of shadow in which hens and dogs lay down to rest.

The air above the earth was so still that even the quaking grass slumbered. Only the ants had not gone to rest. They crawled up the furrows in the bark of oaks, busy and purposeful, without ever pausing or resting. They were like a continuous line of slender snakes in the bark, like snakes that reached from the ground to the lower leaves.

Even high up above the treetops the air was still. It was as though some monstrous fist had crushed it, compressed it. But this utter, unbreathing stillness of the wind lay not only over the valleys of Idaho and not only over the cities of Pescadero and Liberty. It extended as far as Wyoming. It lay over the great plains, where buffalo, grama and blue grass stood motionless in the sun. Even the stems of dried grasses did not stir, though the faintest breeze could make them tremble. Their rustling was silenced and the stillness was broken only when a lizard brushed against them in passing.

The immobility of the air seemed to reach far up into the sky. The men in the fields and the cowboys guarding their herds did not speak about it. But they felt it was strange how slowly the birds flew. They gazed after the swallows with squinting eyes and then they decided that it must be their imagination, that this slow, drifting movement was only an illusion

caused by the strange lack of wind down on the ground. They opened their shirts wider and blew their own breath down against their chests to give themselves the feeling of a breeze. And then they thought about the birds again and wondered whether maybe they were not flying more slowly, after all.

In Utah, too, it was the same, and in Wyoming men went to their windows at night and looked out with the feeling that something was in the air.

The longer the calm lasted the clearer the sky seemed to become. It was as though all impurities gradually sifted down out of the atmosphere, all the dust and bacteria and seeds. The air became clearer and bluer, and nevertheless it was harder to breathe.

Yet clear as it was, it was not clear enough to show the locust swarms. Thousands of feet high they hovered above the earth. A sharp-eyed observer might have detected something like a mist high up in the sky. When the rays of the sun fell slantwise into the swarm, one might have seen the shimmering of wings. But no one could know that these were the locusts from Lemhi and Bear Lake Counties and from the region around Walter Lake. It occurred to no one that thousands of feet above them a menacing cloud hovered, a cloud that cast no shadow, that was almost as transparent as the air itself. And that at any moment might descend.

The women stood in the gardens and looked at the strawberries. They weeded the beds of lettuce and they puffed their cheeks and said "Whoo," because they found it hard to breathe. And the men were irritable because the ground was so hard and so dry; the wheat did not grow and the whole farm seemed to be standing still. The children drank water at the well and munched slices of bread and hid near the barn because they disliked having to work in the garden.

And the locusts hovered over the land. They did not notice the calm in the air. They had worked their way up to layers of air where there was always a faint breeze blowing. Because they formed one great swarm, the wind was caught in their mass as in a sail. They flew without any order. But they stayed as close together as they could. They touched each other with the tips of their outspread wings. They felt their fellows beside them, they heard the fluttering of their wings and they smelled their odour.

At evening they settled down upon a meadow. Sometimes, then, other swarms would join them. Next morning all together would strip the land clear. But this was not their real feeding, their grand feast. It was only a hasty, stop-over meal. When the sun rose, they flew on. High, high in the sky. Noiseless, invisible, dangerous.

And the farmers in the fields grumbled about the heat and the lack of wind.

The storekeepers at Cheyenne could not make up their minds to close. There were still too many customers. And the ones who came in the evening were often the best. It was good when they talked while they waited. Then they did not get impatient. At all costs the storekeepers had to keep from getting impatient. And had to wait on them in their proper turn. Not step on anyone's toes. Especially not in this heat, when they had drunk a little more than they needed to quench their thirst. Best thing to do was to try to keep some casual conversation going. But not mix in their affairs. It was none of a storekeeper's concern, what they were to one another or what they had against one another. A storekeeper had to do business. He wanted a small share of the wages they had in their pockets. And he had to hurry. First come, first served. What a cowboy didn't buy to-day, he couldn't pay for to-morrow. But take it easy for God's sake. Be careful. Otherwise they might wreck the glass cases.

Storekeepers and bartenders alike had this eternal problem.

It was unbearable. If only the big fellow would make up his mind. The others who were waiting would get impatient sooner or later. And all this fuss for a lousy little gold chain. What had been added to the purchase price? Two hundred per cent.? Three hundred per cent.? Too little, in any case. How was a man to live if he wasted half an hour on a single customer? You want to know how much gold there is in the chain? Why at least an ounce and a half. At least. Too dear? But think of the work. What do you think it costs to make a chain like that? That's delicate work. Every link has to be made separately. By specialists. And look at this lock. It's a work of art, I tell you. Sure, there are cheaper chains. But any woman that's a lady looks at the lock right off and then she knows the kind of chain it is. . . . O God, now the others are really getting impatient. Wait just a minute more, gentlemen, I'll be ready for you in a minute. Just a minute. Take a look at these bracelets here. Sure, take them over to the light. Well, sir, what about the chain? No, no, I can't do anything about the price. Take the smaller one if this is too dear.

Johnny Brown couldn't make up his mind. Did he really want to buy a chain at all? Wasn't there anything else the girl might like better? It was hard to decide when you weren't in the habit of giving girls presents. Especially a girl who wasn't like the rest. A school-teacher. Not the kind of dame you went up to in a saloon and invited for a drink.

"You thinkin' of sleeping here?" one of the other men asked.

Johnny knew it was the small dark fellow who had made remarks in an undertone before. He was with two others who had proclaimed as soon as they came in that they wanted bracelets with stones, solid and good-looking bracelets. And the sallow little man behind the counter had trembled all over because he couldn't serve all three at once.

Johnny pretended he had not heard. He had time to get something

good. He wasn't going to hand out his good money just like that. A hell of a nerve the fellow had, asking so much for a lousy gold chain. What the hell was all the gold in the chain worth? Maybe fifteen dollars. They couldn't put anything over on him. Gold had been his business, after all. The only reason he'd given it up and come to Cheyenne was that now prospecting wasn't worth the candle any more. Nowadays you were better off buying cows. A man had to move with the times. And this runt here was trying to tell him what a gold chain was worth.

"Hey, you," the little man started again.

"The gent will make up his mind in a moment," the storekeeper interrupted.

"I want you to weigh the chain," Johnny said, without looking around at the others.

"Look here," the storekeeper replied, "we don't sell gold chains by weight. If you want to buy gold by weight, you have to go to a bank. What I'm selling are ornaments, pretty things, works of art that ladies hang around their necks because it makes them feel good, because they're delicate and elegant and modern."

"Listen, shorty," one of the other men said to the storekeeper. He stepped up to the counter beside Johnny. "Outside in the window I seen a bracelet with red stones . . ."

"Just one moment more," the storekeeper said, licking his lips with his sharp tongue, "just another few seconds."

Johnny looked at the man who had come to his side. The fellow had a big red face, short, close-cropped hair and small blue eyes.

"What d'ya mean, a few seconds?" he asked. "Maybe I won't be through for half an hour. Maybe I want to buy more than a gold chain that has hardly any gold."

"Hardly any gold?" the storekeeper asked, sweating.

"Maybe you want to buy yourself a wire and string gold nuggets on it and hang it around your dame's neck," the little man in the background said.

All at once they all felt that their faces were dripping with sweat, that their clothes were clinging to their bodies, that they could scarcely breathe. There was a fierce pressure around their heads and the kerosene lamps made unbearable noises. Something had to happen. . . .

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," the storekeeper panted. But it was too late. Johnny turned to face the small man. For the fraction of a second he saw the man's mousy face, his small dark eyes and sharp nose and the prominent canine teeth, and then his fist connected with the jaw. It was marvellous to feel the impact of his fist against the face and to hear the dull thud of flesh on flesh and bone on bone. And then there came a frightful crashing and splintering as the little man reeled back against the glass showcase.

"Stop, stop," the storekeeper pleaded hoarsely.

"Shout your head off, shorty," Johnny said. All at once he felt marvellously light and relieved, as though a breath of cool air had passed through the room.

The smile was still on his lips when the big man's fist hit him in the temple. Where is he, the bastard? he thought. He swing his fist to the side and lost his balance. Then he suddenly saw the red face vibrating gently very close to him, very close and like a big, shining moon that got bigger and shinier until it filled up everything and took in everything.

Johnny Brown fell forward like an ox when its knees give way. A second blow had struck him clean on the jaw. When he hit the floor, a puff of dust rose and spread out until it filled the store.

The storekeeper, who had ducked behind the counter with the gold chain clenched tightly in his hand, bobbed up. The dust made him cough, so that he couldn't talk. He ran for the door. He must get the police. These crazy cowboys would have to pay for the damage. That broken glass case cost money. God alone knew what else had been ruined. And if the police didn't come right away the whole gang of them would be gone.

"Hey, shorty, where you going in such a hurry?" someone behind him said, and a hand clutched his shoulder.

He turned. The big man with the red face held him. "Go get some water for them," he said, caressing the knuckles of his right hand.

"What about the damage? Who's going to pay my damage?"

"Go get some water, I say."

"A glass case like that costs ten dollars at least," the little man groaned, going toward the rear door, which led to a small courtyard with a well.

"*Merde*," was the first word Johnny said when he came to. The fellow with the red face knelt beside him and gave him a drink. The one with the mousy face was sitting up in the corner, with a bloody towel around his head. The third man was looking at brooches.

"A neat piece of work," the storekeeper was saying in his hoarse voice. "I see you can judge these things. I don't have to talk it up to you. You got no idea how I like to have customers who know what they want. Not the kind that always cry about things being too dear. Some know how to judge the real value of a thing. Not just by the stuff that's in it. They know something about work and artistic value and the pattern."

"How much d'ya say it is?"

"*Merde*," Johnny said again, this time so loudly that they all looked at him.

"What's that?" the man with the red face asked.

Johnny tried to remember where he had seen the man before. He felt his temple. He had pain all the way down to his shoulder. And he

couldn't move his head. Slowly he recalled. Everything had been all right when he smacked the little runt. But then the big guy had knocked him out. Dumb, he should have watched out. He wondered what time it was. Agnes must have been waiting for him a long time. He'd wanted to buy her a chain. That's the way the whole mess had started. Should he go ahead and buy it, anyway? Could he go to see the girl at all? After all, she wasn't just any old girl; she was a schoolteacher.

"Can't you get up?" the man with the red face asked.

"Why, sure," Johnny said, dragging himself to his feet.

"All right," the big man said, and went over to the mousy fellow with the towel.

"What's wrong with you?" he demanded.

"I think the bleeding's stopped. I wish I had a gin."

"Won't you first make your purchases, gentlemen?" the storekeeper said. "And my glass case. My God, who's going to pay me for my glass case?"

"Shut up," Johnny said. He was so dizzy he had to lean against the counter.

"What's a piece of glass like that cost?" the big man asked.

"Ten dollars maybe; maybe more."

"I'll pay," Johnny said, forming the words carefully. It was getting hard for him to speak. "N' I want to buy a gold chain. A real gold chain that has some gold in it. A heavy one, the kind a lady c'n wear. Not a girl, a lady, get me?"

He laid money on the counter. "And when I say I want somethin' right and proper, I c'n pay for it. I didn't come in here because I want a piece of junk. I want somethin' good, somethin' fine . . ."

He brushed his hand over his eyes. What time would it be? No doubt about it, she wouldn't be waiting for him any longer. After all, she couldn't stand for hours on a corner and let the men gape at her as they passed. Not she. What must she think of him? She couldn't imagine that it was because of a chain he wanted to buy her. . . . What had happened, anyway? What had the mousy-looking fellow said?

"Maybe you'll take two chains," the storekeeper suggested.

"I won't take nothing," Johnny growled. "Here's your ten for the glass. I don't need nothin'. Not any more. It's too late for anything, too late."

The big man brought the little mousy man over to the counter. Each of the three bought a brooch with big red and green stones. They didn't talk much and they took what the storekeeper handed them. They put the brooches in their pants pockets. Then they stood silent together for a few seconds.

"Well," the big fellow said finally, "I think a drink wouldn't do any of us no harm."

"Swig of whisky ain't a bad idea," the mousy one said.

"I'll pay for a round," said the man who had not mixed in the fight, "a round for everybody."

The three looked at Johnny. Wouldn't be bad to get drunk now, he thought. It's all busted anyway before it had a chance to start. You get a real girl and then you get into a brawl and give her a stand-up. And she must have waited a long time. She must have walked up and down and kept looking at the clock and felt awfully embarrassed, and maybe she cried. Maybe he should pay her a visit at her home. He could explain the whole thing. But she wouldn't want him to come. She'd be afraid of what people would say.

"O.K. about the round?" the big man asked.

"O.K. for me," Johnny said. "My name is Johnny Brown."

"Proud to know you," the big man said, shaking hands with Johnny. "My name is Will Greene and him with the towel is Arthur Canari and this is Horace Baker."

"Proud to know you all," Johnny said, and shook hands all around.

It was night when they went out on the street. The air was motionless as it had been for days. And although the sky was pricked with stars, one had the feeling that everything was covered by a thick woollen blanket.

When the four came into Jack's saloon toward midnight, they were all pretty well stewed. They had knocked off a good many rounds of gin and felt as if they had known one another for ages. The first rounds they had paid for by turns, but after a while all of them had squirmed out of paying and the upshot was that Arthur Canari had stood for most of the drinks.

He carried his money in a brown leather purse hung around his neck, and whenever he took it out, he unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a mat of curly brown hair, and the girls sitting with them giggled. The girls had pinned the brooches with the red and green stones to their flowery blouses; the ornaments were heavy and the thin material hung down in folds.

As long as the men could still think clearly and their minds were only a little hazy, they talked about cattle.

No doubt about it, it was a good business to buy a herd. But you have to have the long green to back you up. If you didn't, you'd better stick to cowboying. And you had to know something about it. They quarrelled about whether it was better to gather a herd or to buy it entire. In the latter case you got the calves for nothing. All very well, but you needed a lot more cash. You couldn't all be a John Wesley Cliff or a Prowers. Anyway, times weren't so easy nowadays.

They plied Johnny, the greenhorn, with information. He mustn't think it was so easy. After all, a yearling cost seven dollars, a two-year-

old eleven dollars, a three-year-old sixteen and a four-year-old twenty-three dollars. Besides that there were all sorts of other expenditures. A foreman earned fifty dollars a month and he cost you at least twenty dollars more in board; and a horse, a single horse, cost seventy-five dollars.

Johnny had laid a sheet of paper on the table and was reckoning. They talked persuasively and all at once, and it was hard to figure it all out. The girls sat by them, bored. Now and then they persuaded one of the men to dance. But nothing came of it. The men couldn't keep their minds on girls. They were absorbed in their theories about cows and calves and horses, and they were pleased to be able to explain it all to a newcomer. They themselves had all dreamed of having their own herds, but somehow there was never enough money. But they had all thought it out. Thought the whole thing out carefully as they rode along with the herds, slowly, no more than fifteen miles a day. And when at night they rode by turns around the resting herds, they had thought about it too. They knew every detail, every trick of the trade. It was fun now to tell their dreams to a stranger in the form of advice. It was better than getting hot dancing with the girls, especially when you were no longer so steady on your feet.

With clumsy fingers, Johnny wrote everything down as best he could. He had talked with a good many men about this, but never before had he received so many practical suggestions. By the time they got to calculating profits, he could no longer add. Enormous figures were bandied about. With an insignificant amount of capital you could make tremendous profits, if things didn't go wrong. And it was a good idea not to wait. Every day was precious. But of course you had to have luck. Not that you needed specially good luck, just so long as you didn't have a streak of real bad luck. And naturally you had to work hard, and use your head. You had to listen to others and learn from the mistakes others made—not do what all fools did, get swellheaded and think you knew better than those who had been doing nothing else all their lives but ride herd. Still, there wasn't so much mystery about it. It wasn't any magic, just a few little tricks. If you knew them, the money was as good as in your pocket. Nothing could happen to you then and if you weren't an out-and-out sap you'd have a fat profit after a few years. Figures don't lie. You could see yourself what you could make, and that was reckoning conservative and assuming that prices would stay the same. But, of course, they'd rise. And then? Then you could get richer and richer. You could have a lot of herds, thousands and thousands of head of cattle. How many did he think came up the Chisholm Trail from Texas in a single year? Half a million head, no less.

Finally, when Johnny could no longer read his own figures, he crumpled the paper into his pocket. He felt marvellous. What a future

he had. Smart he was to have come to Cheyenne with his gold still in his pocket. He'd found a new gold mine. Let the others go on digging in the mud. All the really big finds had been made. You had to change with the times, and each time had its own kind of gold. These days it was the cattle herds.

Gradually the men fell silent. They were drunker than ever now. They had taken the girls in their laps and the girls had wound their arms around their necks. The men caressed the silken blouses with their hard fingers. They pressed their unshaven faces against the girls' cheeks. But their conversation stuck in their minds and the girls realized they wouldn't get anywhere and the evening was wasting away, so they looked around cautiously for other prey.

Johnny had no girl; he was thinking of Agnes. Sure, she fitted right into his scheme. He would tell her about all his plans. He would show her what kind of life they could have together. No, she wouldn't have to teach kids to read and write just to earn a few cents. She would ride in a coach-and-four if she wished. He must go straight to her to-morrow morning. And, of course, he must buy her the gold chain. Or maybe he should buy two chains. Then at least they'd have some weight in gold—after all, they were going to cost as much as a whole lot of yearlings. Maybe she wouldn't like a chain at all. How could she know what a chain like that was worth? How should she know that you only had to look at the lock to know that it wasn't any cheap piece of junk, but something a lady could wear?

Suddenly, without forewarning, all the men got up and left. Silently they went to Frank Sutherland's Bar.

When they entered they saw a man with a red beard standing in the middle of the room and speaking in a gentle voice to the patrons. He was tall and thin, and one of his shoulders seemed lower than the other. He had a queer smile on his lips, as though they could speak only kindly words.

Only those sitting quite close to him were paying any attention to what he was saying. The others were talking, shouting, laughing and drinking undisturbed.

The room had a low ceiling supported by square wooden pillars. It was filled with tobacco smoke and the voices of men and the laughter of women. But above all the din sounded the words of the man with the red beard. At one moment they were loud and distinct, a moment later a smothered murmur, but they were always there and they never were quite swallowed up in the racket the others were making.

Johnny and his companions went to the bar. They turned their backs to the red-bearded man and ordered gin. They drained the first glass at a single gulp. The lamp over their heads hummed and dice rattled on the tables and money clinked and glasses tinkled and men called out

orders to the bartender and girls screeched because someone had spilled whisky over their dresses and Sutherland opened bottles and threw the empty ones into a box in the corner.

Sutherland had a pale face with soft, pouchy cheeks and coal-black hair. He glared out of his small, ratlike eyes at the man with the red beard. It was the strong, penetrating ring in his voice that got on your nerves. If it kept up, business would be falling off—if not something worse. There'd been something in the air, anyway, these last few days; hard to get any decent sleep and yet you didn't know why. The devil knew what it was got you so nervous that your hand shook when you poured drinks, and the light seemed dimmer than usual. After all, everything was all right. The boys with the big hats all had fat purses, and all the whisky and brandy still came out of the same keg. All you had to do was colour it a little different before you poured it into the glasses from the bottles with the pretty labels. Nothing wrong here. All the customers pleased because their glasses were always filled up, full to the brim. After all, what difference did it make whether you got twenty-three or twenty-four or twenty-five glasses out of a bottle when it didn't make any difference in your profit? What the devil was it that made you feel so rotten, with that awful weight sitting on your belly? And why did you start whenever a girl screamed? You ought to be used to it by now. And what the hell sent the blood to your head just because the women were making such a fuss instead of keeping their mouths shut and remembering that you only tolerated them here and could throw them out any time you felt like it because you knew they were all cheating you right and left and taking money from the men and not turning it over? Ah, it was a stinking business, a stinking, disgusting business, and that fellow with the red beard was enough to drive you mad.

"Can't you watch what you're doing?" Johnny growled when Sutherland poured the gin over his hand instead of into the glass.

"Won't hurt your hand, a little pure gin."

"My hand is my own hand, get me?"

"I didn't mean anything, Johnny. It's just the heat. And that fellow there."

"What fellow?"

"The one talking. With the red beard."

"Why don't you give him a drink? Then he'll keep his face shut."

"Drink? Him?"

"If I invite him to a drink, invite him, I said, won't he drink? Won't he drink with me? If I, Johnny Brown, invite him, he won't drink?"

Sutherland shook his head. He sensed that he ought to sober up, ought to sober up damned fast. They'd wrecked his whole place once over a drink someone refused. Sure, he'd known there was something in the

air. If only he'd bounced that redbeard out on the street—he didn't do any drinking, anyway, and just disturbed the customers.

"A guy like that won't drink even with you," Canari prodded. "Particularly not with you. Because you're unworthy."

"I'm what?"

"Unworthy. A scabby sheep. A fallen soul."

"So I'm a fallen soul because I don't go to church? And don't believe in God with a long beard? So I can't have anythin' to do with ladies, nothin' but Sutherland's girls. So that's why he won't drink with me. That's why?"

"To him you're lower than the dust," Will Greene said. "Dust and cow dung."

"Unclean, that's what you are to him," Horace Baker said. "A pile o' manure."

Johnny Brown turned slowly. The man with the red beard was still standing in the centre of the room. His arms were folded over his chest. He held his head a little to one side, and he spoke steadily, calmly, incisively. His eyes sought out the eyes of the others, and whenever he found someone's gaze he looked straight at him and spoke to him as though he was alone in the room, until the man dropped his eyes.

"Hey, you!" Johnny called.

Only the men at the bar knew whom he addressed. They turned their heads slowly, but their bodies did not move. They were leaning on the bar with their heads low down in their necks. Their eyes were bloodshot and their jaws slack.

Sutherland was holding a glass in his hand and wiping it dry again and again with his apron. His hands were damp and the glass slipped between his fingers. He had already tossed forty-four empty bottles into the box. Forty-four times twenty-five glasses times eighteen cents—that was how much he had made? How much was forty-four times twenty-five times eighteen? Ought he throw the redhead out before they wrecked his whole place?

"Hey!" Johnny called again, and this time almost everyone heard him. The people at the tables looked up, wondering. The men pushed aside the girls in their arms to get a better view. They folded their hands around the bottles and drew their legs out from under the tables so that they could get up quickly if necessary.

Conversation stopped. A few in the far corner of the room had not yet heard; they still talked and laughed loudly. A girl chirped a tune in a high, cracked voice. She broke off in the middle. The others fell silent too. Now there was nothing to be heard but the humming of the lights and the quiet scraping of chairs, and the voice of the man with the red beard.

His voice seemed to have grown louder. He spoke slowly, and there

was nothing of the sermon about his speech. His words were simple and not flowery. He spoke like a farmer, and there was a faint smile on his face that never faded.

"I can't blame you if you don't want to believe," he said. "You've all heard so many lies that you've become suspicious. You expect everyone will betray you, cheat you out of the few pennies you've earned. Why should you believe that there is a God, a living God who performs miracles for His children?"

"Hey, you!" Johnny called again. "You can keep the rest of your sermon. Come and have a drink. Take your pick. D'ya hear, Frank, the gent can take his pick—whisky or gin or brandy, whatever he wants and as much as he wants. The gent is my guest. And my name is Johnny Brown—get it?—Johnny Brown, and I've got a place reserved for you here at the bar, a place of honour for you."

The man with the red beard let his arms sink slowly to his sides. He turned toward Johnny, and the light of a lamp fell full on his face, on a sun-browned forehead dotted with sweat, on a long, slightly crooked nose and pink ears, on the beard and on the unchanging smile around his mouth.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Brown," he said quietly. "My name is Jeremiah Kentrup."

"Proud to meet ya," Johnny said. "What'll you have?"

"If I can take my pick, I'll take water."

Several men in the room guffawed.

"Cold water or warm?" someone called, and someone else wanted to know the brand.

"I invited you to have a drink with me, Mr. Kentrup," Johnny said, "and you can't refuse to drink. You can't, can you?"

The crowd fell silent and looked at Jeremiah. People leaned forward in their chairs and propped their arms on their thighs, and again the faint scraping of chair legs and the hum of the lamps were the only sounds in the room.

"If I may, I'll take a whisky," Jeremiah said in his quiet, friendly voice.

"A round of whisky," Johnny said. "I'll pay for a round. D'ya hear, Frank? A round for the whole bar in honour of the Reverend Mr. Jeremiah Kentrup."

Jeremiah still stood in the same place. He squinted because the light dazzled him. He ran his tongue over his parched lips. Then he wiped his forehead with his sleeve and went to the bar.

The men were still silent. They watched Jeremiah's every movement, not quite knowing what to make of the whole affair. But the girls began to chatter again, to giggle and press up against the men and wheedle more drinks. Every minute was precious; if nothing was drunk they earned nothing.

But the men only half listened to them. Their attention was directed toward the bar, because they thought the joke had just begun. After all, Johnny Brown wouldn't start something like this just to have a drink with a preacher. Maybe he wanted to get the redhead drunk and then play a trick on him, like stripping him naked as they had once done to a minister in Atchison, or tying him to a cow and riding him through the town.

"Nice of you to invite me," Jeremiah said, stepping to the bar. "And I oughtn't to accept because I can't return the favour."

"Don't worry about that, brother," Johnny said, slapping Jeremiah on the back. "Your wealth is not of this world."

"When you get to Heaven you'll get enough to eat in one day to equal all that went down our gullets in our whole lives," Canari said histrionically.

"And you can swill whisky by the pailful if you like," Baker contributed.

"N' decent whisky, real Scotch, not Sutherland's firewater," Greene said.

"That may all be true," Jeremiah said. "If God wills He can make me a heaven like a palace. There are wonderful rooms and soft beds and beautiful girls and women. And there is a tremendous kitchen. There they roast whole hogs on spits. The cooks sit there and pour marvellous brown sauce over the juicy cuts. And then they roast geese and chickens and pour red wine over them and throw handfuls of truffles into their pots the way you cut up onions in a frying pan. And then the Lord will send for the spices. An angel brings them from the Far East, deep in the heart of Asia, things you've never even seen. All sorts of peppers and nutmegs and ginger. They spice the food. Not too much and not too little, just the right amount. And then there are vegetables and fruits and cakes and wines. Wines such as you can't imagine. They look like gold and they smell of flowers and you can get drunk after a single glass, even a single swig. But you don't want to get drunk because it isn't necessary. You're so completely happy, and when you're happy why should you want to forget? You don't have to ride for days and weeks alongside of thousands of cows and calves to earn a few dollars. You don't have to sleep on the bare ground in rain and cold and, when you're sick, to lie helpless in a hut somewhere and croak. You're happy and sheltered and you sit at covered tables and you're taken care of. And all this He can do for you if He so desires. For it lies in His power to work wonders. Or did you think He has become weaker and no longer has the strength He once had and there aren't miracles any more? Do you believe that?"

When he paused for a moment and looked around the room, Johnny said, "What about your drink, brother?"

"Wait a moment," Jeremiah retorted. "Let me tell about the miracle

first. If I drink whisky, you'll think I'm not sober and then you won't believe my testimony. You'll say, rightly, 'He was pie-eyed; we couldn't believe a word he said, not a word.' And yet it's the pure and simple truth that I want to tell you now."

The men sat and gazed at Jeremiah. They were frowning and thinking what a dog's life they led and how they would like to have their own house and a little land and their own cow and a woman who was there for them alone. After all, it must be pretty easy for the Lord to pull off a simple little miracle like that.

Their arms drifted from the girls' shoulders and they reached for their glasses. With secret embarrassment they glanced at one another, took a few good swallows of whisky, and felt like themselves again.

What the hell did this redhead want of them, anyway? Why didn't he let them alone? They had expected a good joke and now they were sitting listening to his sermon. Instead of their stuffing him full of alcohol until he couldn't stand on his feet, he was stuffing them full of religion and spoiling the evening. Where the hell did he get off?

Wanted to tell them a story, did he? What did he know, with his fatuous smile and his red saint's beard and his crooked shoulder? Sweetness and light. Probably couldn't look on while a calf was being slaughtered. Probably would faint if he saw a corpse. Where the hell did he get off?

"Shut your trap," someone called from a corner. "We ain't interested in your miracle."

"We don't believe in miracles," someone else bellowed.

"Not when you tell it."

"Redhead."

"Hunchback."

"Sunday-school teacher."

"So the Lord pulls off miracles for a guy that don't have enough money in his pocket to return a treat," Johnny growled.

"Want to see some pretty legs, y'r reverend?" one of the girls cried, clambering on a table. "Want to see a real miracle?" She bent down and lifted her long black skirt over her knees. She was wearing diaphanous black stockings and a wide red garter with a bowknot. "Come on, come up closer. No need to blush. Come on over and feel them. Come on, y'r reverend. Won't cost you a cent. The gents here will pay."

"Go on," Johnny shouted, shoving Jeremiah forward. "Don't stand still like a stick of wood when a lady asks you. Or maybe you don't think she's a lady?"

From all sides they began to shout. They laughed until the tears ran. "Go on closer," they roared, "go right up to her. Won't burn ya. Won't bite either. Get along there, preacher." Finally, there was so much noise that no one's voice could be distinguished.

Slowly Jeremiah walked toward the girl. The closer he came to her the wilder grew the tumult. The men clapped their hands in rhythm. They stamped their heavy boots until the air became thick with the dust that rose from the floor boards. They began to sing and dash glasses against the floor, and the girls climbed on the tables waving handkerchiefs and throwing flowers and screaming like mad when a rose caught by its thorn in Jeremiah's coat and remained hanging there, bobbing up and down on his back.

Jeremiah's face was immobile. His arms hung slack at his side and his hands were open. The veins on the back of his hands were thick and shimmered with a bluish hue. He groped his way forward, as though walking in his sleep. He was not afraid, nor ashamed, and his head was quite clear. But his mouth was dry and his tongue seemed stuck to his palate, and he could not say all the things he was thinking. It was his fault that they did not understand him. He must speak to them about the locusts. About the miracle he had seen with his own eyes. He didn't want to tell them stories. God, no—he didn't want to tell any fake stories. After all, it was all true about the locusts, with their hard jaws and their wings and long legs. And the stripped fields were no story, and the burning of the meadow and the miracle itself.

"Take hold of them," the men shouted when Jeremiah stood in front of the girl. "Take hold of her legs. Don't be shy. They're the work of God's own hands. You can have them for nothing. For nothing, because you're a holy man. Everyone else has to pay a little—not much." They laughed hard until their faces were beet-red and their big bodies contorted.

Jeremiah turned around. He raised his hand, and gradually they fell silent, curious. They leaned forward to hear him. With big red handkerchiefs they wiped their eyes and foreheads and the back of their necks. They hastily tossed off a few gulps of whisky.

"Have you ever heard of the locusts?" Jeremiah asked. "Has any of you ever seen them? Not one or ten or a thousand, but millions upon millions?"

"Shut up. Grab the girl. That's all we want."

"Grab her. Grab her."

"Have you ever seen," Jeremiah went on imperturbably, "what it's like when they descend on a field? What it's like when you see nothing but their bodies and hear nothing but the sound of their gnawing?"

The men began to shout again. Their faces grew mean, their eyes narrowed and their lower jaws thrust forward. Their voices became softer and had a dangerous edge.

"Let me talk!" Jeremiah cried. "Don't sit there and hold your ears. Don't say, no, what do I care about the locusts? You can do whatever you want with me after I've spoken. I can't escape you. Or would you

rather wake up some day and find them upon you? I can't force you to believe in miracles. But what will you say if some day you have to stand by and watch while they eat up your pastures and your cows starve and the calves die and the horses collapse from weakness? Then will you remember that once you could have learned how to fight them, but that you wouldn't listen because you thought it more important to drink whisky and because you preferred to see Jeremiah Kentrup touch a girl's legs than to hear how to fight a terrible pestilence?"

Through the haze of drunkenness Johnny saw suddenly the campfire by the river in Lemhi County and the little Frenchman who wanted to buy a farm. He recalled his burial of Jacques Dufour, and how he had found millions of little lumps of slime in the sand among the nuggets of gold. He remembered how later he had found out they were locust eggs, and how Dufour had admitted that farmers never really got rich. Poor Dufour, he was lucky he had never bought his farm. All those millions of locust eggs would have hatched and devoured his crops. A good fellow, Dufour. If he hadn't buried him, he would never have found his claim . . .

"Well, what can you do about them, preacher?" he said, sobered. "I never heard about anybody doing anything about them but starving."

The men fell silent, startled by Johnny's sudden sobriety.

In one corner of the room a girl stood on a table and began to shout. In her eyes was the fanatic gleam Jeremiah knew from Mormon meetings, the insuppressible need to speak of those who delivered testimonies.

"What can be done about them?" she screamed. "If you could do anything about them, I'd be home in my father's house instead of getting drunk in Sutherland's bar in Cheyenne. I'd be planting tomatoes and tying up beans and milking the cows if my father'd been on better terms with God. Hard luck I never met you before, Mr. Preacher. We would've prayed day and night and God would have filled our plates for us."

The girl's face was flushed. She held her arms akimbo and leaned forward toward Jeremiah, and her voice was hoarse from screaming.

"But we didn't have time to pray, we poor sinners. Instead we went out to the fields, ma and dad and grandpa and Charley and Becky and Sarah, and we stepped on them till we couldn't lift our feet. For days we stepped on them, did nothin' else. And we stepped on the vegetables as well as the locusts, and the patch of wheat we had planted. We knew we wouldn't have anything to eat in the winter but a few potatoes. But we figured next year it would be better and we'd have bread and maybe even apply jelly and milk and butter. And you know what happened, preacher? Do you know? One morning we came out and there they

were, all back again. They came to life again, maybe. Anyway, there were just as many. What did we do? We started all over again." She laughed hysterically. "God, wasn't that funny? We started all over again. Three times we started all over again. And every year there were less of us. First grandma kicked off, and then Sarah and then Becky . . ." The girl's voice gave out. She was panting heavily, her mouth open. She swayed a little, and then her knees bent. The man at the table caught her just in time. Gently he put her down on her chair, handed her a drink and wiped her face with his big red handkerchief.

"Maybe you'll shut up now," someone said to Jeremiah.

"Or d'ya want me to throw you out?" Sutherland asked.

"No," Johnny said. "I paid for the drinks, didn't I? Let him tell us if he knows."

"All right, talk," cried the girl who still stood with lifted skirts on the table behind Jeremiah. She nudged him with her knees so that he took an involuntary step forward. "Come on, Mr. Preacher, spill it."

She put her foot on his shoulder, and again he stumbled forward. "What's the matter, lost your tongue?" she shouted. "Do as Johnny says. Johnny's the boss. Come on, talk."

"Let him alone," Johnny said. "Let him get his bearings." Again the men stared at Johnny.

Jeremiah shook his head. "I don't have to get my bearings in order to tell the truth," he said. "I just say things as I think of them, and because they're true they have more power than any sermon."

He looked around, searching for one face whose eyes were alight with question.

"Listen," he began, "in Bear Lake County the wind blows eternally. The ground is fine and soft and the earth feels almost like velvet. You hardly find any stones in it, and in the valleys where the sun shines you can grow vegetables because there's enough water from the brook. The air is fresh and spicy and sometimes it's so strong that it takes your breath away. In the wintertime clouds hang in the trees, and when it freezes the ground gets hard as a drum and when you walk on it it sounds like one. It's rough country, but good country too. It's a country for strong men and a land of hope for the weak.

"One night, many years ago, when I spent the night together with many others in the Mississippi Valley, an angel of the Lord entered my tent. He described to me the way to Bear Lake County and he showed me the land that God had destined for us. Next morning I and a hundred others started out to find the promised land, and one day we found it."

"Talk about the locusts," Johnny said.

"This is the way the story of the locusts begins. They are creatures of God, like all the animals and like ourselves. They live by the laws the

Lord has given them, and we would not care about them if they didn't destroy our harvests and ruin our land. That's why I must speak of us before I can speak of them.

"At first the promised land strove against us. It made us sick, it made us freeze and hunger. But because we believed in it, we survived, and sixty-three of us were still there when we sowed our seed.

"Even before we had placed the seed in the ground, I discovered the locusts. One of our men showed the eggs to me. I said nothing to anyone about them, and he, too, held his tongue, because we thought that perhaps God would perform a miracle and destroy the brood before it hatched."

The longer Jeremiah spoke the more quiet it became in the room. At first the men had shifted back and forth in their seats. They had taken drinks and looked at one another, and now and then someone had opened his mouth to heckle, but then said nothing. It was the tone of Jeremiah's voice that silenced them at first, and after a while it was the story he was telling. For he told it carefully and well. It was a story of the earth. They had had to fight for every loaf of bread, and for all of them it was the earth that had given them nourishment. The earth could be soft and crumbly or hard and hot and cracked. Locust eggs could lie beside the wheat seed, and the ants or the larvæ of the ichneumon flies might crawl among the roots of the grama grass. The earth might be sandy or overgrown with ancient trees and covered with fragrant humus; or it might be the bed of a river, or a meadow. But it was always the earth over which they drove their animals, the earth they ploughed and harrowed and cultivated, praised or cursed. Always it was the earth they had to combat and cajole, love and conquer.

Jeremiah was still talking when the first light of dawn mingled with the glow of the lamps. A few of the girls had fallen asleep, but the men had remained awake. Their faces were grey in the half-light, and the wrinkles around their eyes looked like spider-webs.

The squares of the windows grew lighter. At first grey, they had become blue, then red, and finally corn-yellow and gold. When Jeremiah paused, one heard the twittering of sparrows in the street and now and again in the distance sounded the crowing of a cock. Someone began hammering in the courtyard near by and boots tapped along the pavement outside.

"And so I came here to help you and others. And that's all."

Together with the other men, he went out on the street. They did not talk much. They squinted as the sun struck their eyes. Then they breathed deeply and stretched to get rid of the stiffness from long sitting. They yawned until their eyes watered, and then they put their hands in their pockets and drifted away in small groups.

"A nice day," Johnny said to Jeremiah after a while.

Jeremiah nodded. "It'll be hot again."

"Not even a breath of air yet," Johnny assented and stood still to gaze up at the sky.

Jeremiah stood still also, then some of the others, and all looked up at the sky. It was radiant, and so transparently clear that they could easily make out a thin cloud, though it floated at an awesome height and was no darker than the filmy spray of a waterfall. The longer the men looked up the more certain they became that they had never seen anything like it. Finally, they saw spots before their eyes and lowered their heads.

"It's moving," someone said. "Did you see? It moved."

"I think it's dust," Johnny said.

They looked at Jeremiah, who was standing motionless with his hand over his eyes, apparently unaware that they were talking.

"What do you say, preacher?" Johnny asked.

Jeremiah spoke with his eyes still fixed on the cloud. "It isn't dust," he said, "and it isn't a cloud."

"Well, what is it?" Johnny's voice was impatient. He looked up at the sky again.

"It's the locusts," Jeremiah replied. "A tremendous swarm. So big you can't conceive it. Something that could destroy a whole country. Nobody knows anything about it; it hangs high up there in the sky like a veil and moves silently over the country and doesn't even cast a shadow on the earth. See how it keeps changing on the edges, getting thinner and thicker as the wind hits it. And yet it keeps moving steadily in the same direction. To-night it will feed on the crops of a few farmers and to-morrow it will take the air again and go on and on till it reaches its goal. And then it will really get down to feeding, to the last grand feast of its life. And there it will stay, destroying every blade of grass and infesting the earth with its eggs, and there it will die."

Jeremiah bowed his head. He brushed his hand over his blinded eyes and looked at the others with a rueful smile.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" he said.

"I dunno," Johnny answered. "Maybe you're right."

When they looked up at the sky again, the swarm was gone. Suddenly they all felt dead tired and their heads were heavy. Maybe they were just seeing things, they thought, or the preacher had befogged their minds with his locust stories.

Wordlessly, they walked on.

By the hundreds the cows stood beside the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad in Cheyenne. They held their heads low and stared emptily with their wide brown eyes. They were waiting to be loaded. Waiting for a cowboy to come and lead them forward over a plank into an open

freight car. They stood indifferent, one behind the other. When they moved, their hindquarters encountered the heads of those standing behind them, and when they shifted to one side, they pressed against the ribs of their neighbours. The mark of their origin was branded into their brown hides. A for Arapahoe and B for Boulder and so on. They were almost all the same size. Their calves had been taken away, and they were waiting until their turn came.

The cattlemen had brought them up from Texas. They had been picked out for sale in the fall, but for some reason they had not been sold. The cowboys had driven them up the trail, slowly and gently, not more than fifteen miles a day. Always they had walked or eaten or chewed their cud or slept with the cowboys all around them. There had always been thousands behind and in front of them. Nevertheless, there had been grazing for all, and water for all. Now they waited for days and days and received at most a pailful of water now and then. And this would go on until they were loaded into the cattle cars.

The life that lay behind them had been a good life. Even the cowboys who goaded them when they didn't walk meekly into the dark cattle wagons—these cowboys who beat them and pushed them and pulled them by the tail—kept thinking that it was a shame to let them stand around here in the heat at the Cheyenne freight yards. They themselves had swallowed too much dust and were yearning to get on their horses again. The cowboys' faces were weary because they didn't sleep nights. They smelled of alcohol all day long, and every day they had less money in their pockets. Sometimes one of them would disappear, and then there would be a new cross in the cemetery, and a brief flurry of gossip about the latest gun fight.

On the road the cowboys always looked forward longingly to Cheyenne. But after a few days there they were sick of it and no longer amazed by the brick schoolhouse that was thirty-six feet wide by fifty feet high and had cost thirteen thousand dollars. The Courthouse, with its two storeys, bored them, and the hotel with its forty rooms bored them, and especially in the mornings they were all so sick of the city that they felt like picking quarrels with the fat wool-dealers who walked grave-faced to their offices.

Many of them quit cowpunching in Cheyenne and went to the mines in the Black Hills. All they took with them was their horses, and on the 250-mile ride they always met someone returning to Cheyenne to start cowpunching again.

Now and then one of them had enough money to start out for himself. Almost all of them had had the chance at one time or another, and they could tell the tale for hours of why they had missed the chance. A girl or a faro game or anything under the sun. But they always did miss the chance. And so they were just cowboys and, after all, it was a swell life

and they never went hungry and had money enough when they got to town and there was no sense worrying about the future.

But, of course, they could always give advice, and they could help a good scout like Johnny Brown and see that he didn't make the worst mistakes and get cheated right and left. And they could show him how to load the beasts and prove that they could take it, sitting up all night in a saloon and working all day. They could show that they knew the beasts like their own brothers and handled them right and proper.

Johnny sat on a wooden box and let the sun shine on his bare head. He liked the animals' smell, but he hated the flies and sometimes he smashed his hand against his ankle so hard his own blow hurt.

He listened to what they told him. They all knew something that would interest him. After they had loaded a car, they came over and sat down beside him on the wooden crate. They told him how you kept the animals from running away. They'd seen it in Colorado and it was a neat trick. You dug a ditch six feet wide diagonally across the road and every few inches you laid planks over it. Cattle would never try to cross it. And then they described how *they* would do it if they had to.

They quarrelled about breeds. Who says Texas cows are the best? Don't let the dealers put anything over on you, they told Johnny. Hadn't Prowers made his fortune with Hereford shorthorns? Well, not everybody had his luck. And remember that John Wesley Cliff made all his with Texas steers.

The others got up and Johnny sat alone in the sun, daydreaming. He wondered whether the whole thing wasn't a crazy idea. Maybe he'd better stop thinking about starting a herd.

At noon, when school was out, Johnny waited for Agnes Andersen, the schoolteacher. That is, he didn't actually wait for her. He merely stood by chance in the vicinity and chatted with a few of the boys. He wanted to see how she would look when she passed him.

He saw her long before she reached them. Her face was pale, and she had a small narrow mouth and straight blonde hair. Her eyes were always rather sad, even when she laughed. She was carrying a brown satchel in her hand.

Several children were walking at her side. She talked with them, and long before she reached Johnny he could hear her clear voice.

As she passed him, she nodded to him as though everything was all right. Johnny was embarrassed. He lifted his hat, while the others stared at him, and the schoolteacher was long past them before the others also lifted their hats.

"Do you know her?" Greene asked.

"Well, what do you think?" Johnny replied.

"Not bad," Canari remarked.

"She's the teacher," Johnny said.

"I once knew a dame a lot like her," Baker said. "She had the same kind of frailness, so that you were always afraid to lay a hand on her."

"Well, did you?" Johnny asked.

"Of course."

"And?"

"Nothing special."

"D'ya think a girl like her would marry our kind?"

Baker spat and shrugged. "Why not, if you've got enough of the long green."

I guess I'll buy her the chain, after all, Johnny thought.

For the past few days the whole town had known about Jeremiah. At first the women and girls greeted him and the children smiled at him. But the men were hesitant and dubious. Jeremiah seemed to them a queer kind of preacher, the kind that didn't fit into any of their preconceived notions. There was something about him that was alien to a city. A cross between a farmer and a preacher. A man who talked about miracles and the Lord God and revelled in saloons with the cowboys at night. Moreover, he had a red beard, and red was a danger signal.

The men warned their women. Just a tramp, they said, a fellow who had no pulpit to speak from. Look at his shirt. Like a farmer. And his shoes and his ragged clothes and his missing teeth and crooked shoulder.

He's a holy man, the women said. He has a quiet, gentle voice and he smiles when he looks at you. He wants to persuade people to believe again in the omnipotence of God, in the miracles God can perform. And he looks like the pictures in our old Bible. Like St. John.

When the pastors of Cheyenne heard of Jeremiah, they frowned. What right had a stranger within their pale? Wasn't it enough that four Churches were represented in Cheyenne? This was an outrage; they would have to do something about it. They couldn't permit a new heresy to run rampant in their city, especially one that didn't have its own church, that was preached in the open air and in saloons, by a man who was not a trained minister of the gospel. An adventurer who had come from somewhere out west, a man who might be a prospector or engaged in some such shady trade.

The pastors took notes. They must not forget to warn against this false prophet in their sermons next Sunday. It would be a pleasure. It was important to do more, to see that the wolf did not harm their sheep.

The pastors paid visits to clean little houses with bright curtains and embroidered cushions and old-fashioned chairs. They spoke mildly, twiddling their thumbs and gazing, earnest and concerned, over their glasses at the old women they were addressing.

Yes, indeed, they said, we have a clean little town and business is good

and we are making progress. We are practising good and trying to keep out evil. It's bad enough we can't keep the cowboys away. But someone has to take care of the cattle. Still, we can keep others away—men that the Lord has put his mark upon, so that people can recognize them from afar. People who dare to preach God's Word and, moreover, speak of Him as their familiar. Who impudently assert that He converses with them, shows them the way and performs miracles for them. Yes, those we can keep out if we want to. Not by force, of course, but by the power of rejection. Any man would see the folly of talking to people when they didn't listen, and one day he would vanish as he had come.

The old women talked with the younger women. He's an adventurer and a criminal, they said. Never studied the gospel. Talks like a farmer, not like one who has learned to proclaim the Word of God. He wants to mislead us. Maybe he wants more. Maybe he wants to ingratiate himself. Or get hold of one of our girls, because he's out for money.

And the women talked with their children. Don't smile at the redhead any more, they said. He's a tramp, someone we don't know. Can't tell what bad things he means to do. Don't stand still when you see him. Act as though he doesn't exist and be sure you don't listen to him.

And the children said, "Yes, Mother." And next time they met Jeremiah on the street, they ran away, and from the doors of their houses they called after him, "Red devil."

Jeremiah was aware that something was amiss. But when the children called after him, he smiled gently. Why shouldn't children make fun of his red beard?

He paid no attention when most of the townspeople turned away from him. Before long only the cowboys listened to him, but he did not mind. They stood around him of evenings, leaning against the walls of buildings, their hands in their pockets, listening silently. After a while they said they were thirsty and went to Sutherland's or to one of the other saloons.

When they noticed that the townsfolk shunned Jeremiah and heard some of the ugly rumours about him, they concluded that he was of one theirs, an outcast like themselves, and these town bastards had better not lay hands on him, they'd teach the stuffed shirts to keep their traps shut.

"Don't you want to preach in a big church here, Jeremiah?" they asked him one day.

"No," he replied, smiling. "The Word of God needs no churches and no altars or organs. It's strongest when it's by itself."

"As you like," they said. "We'd be glad to get you a church." And they laughed and looked down at their big fists, pushed their hats back on their heads and rubbed their holsters thoughtfully.

It was getting dark and the men were shadowy. Sometimes a face was illuminated for a moment as one of them lit his pipe or a cigarette, and

now and then one cleared his throat. There were no other interruptions, and Jeremiah spoke on in his quiet, friendly voice.

"When you believe," he said, "you are unconquerable, and when you doubt you are lost. And first of all you must believe in yourselves. The land will belong to you, and the wheat and the cattle, and everything you desire, if you listen to His voice and if you understand His words and obey them. You will walk over your own land, build your own stalls, lead the streams over your own fields. Your children will go to your own schools and you yourselves will govern, and the voice of the Lord will speak to you and with His eternal light He will show you the right road."

Jeremiah paused and wiped the sweat from his brow. He looked around and wondered that so many of them were still standing and had not yet gone to Sutherland's. Then he discovered the outlines of a bright figure among the dark shadows of the men, and he knew that it was not his words that had held them.

The men had given her so much room that she stood quite alone and one could see past her into the street. The gentle light that forewent the rising moon was flooding the sky, and its reflection lay on the leaves of trees and the steep roofs of the houses.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," the woman said, because Jeremiah was still silent.

"Oh, no," Jeremiah replied.

"Won't you please go on?"

"Of course," Jeremiah said. "But I don't think it's wise for you to stay here. My name is Jeremiah Kentrup. Maybe you didn't recognize me in the darkness, or maybe my name doesn't mean anything to you. I'm the man with the red beard whom the children are no longer allowed to follow, the man the people are whispering all sorts of stories about. My friends are these boys who get drunk every night, who come to the city with their purses bulging and leave without a cent . . ."

"Of course I know," the woman said. "Is Johnny Brown here with you? I know him, you see."

"Yes," a voice called from the darkness, "here I am."

"Oh, hello, Johnny," the girl said. "Won't you introduce me to Mr. Kentrup?" She paused briefly. "To Mr. Kentrup and the other gentlemen."

"This is Agnes Andersen," Johnny said.

"Proud to meet you," the men said.

"I'm honoured," Agnes said.

"Miss Andersen is the schoolteacher here," Johnny stammered when all the men fell silent.

"Oh," the men said.

"There's nothing special about it," the girl said.

"I think it would be easier to break a wild mustang," someone remarked.

"I never seen a school," someone else said. "Can't imagine what it must be like."

"I seen one once," a third said. "All the kids sit together in a big room and some of them learn one thing and some another thing. Some are older and some younger, some been goin' for years and some just come. 'S a hell of a thing."

"And the hardest part must be to be the teacher," Johnny contributed. "Takes a mighty lot of learning."

"Oh, not at all," Agnes said in her soft voice. "It's not hard at all, really. I think it must be ever so much harder to bring three thousand cows up from Texas."

The men laughed. "What's there to that? Anybody who c'n ride a horse c'n do it. A round-up's a little harder, though, specially in spring when you have to brand the beasts. But once you've learned how, you can do it and you don't have to think about it. All you need to know is that you brand the calf like the dam. Sometimes you got mavericks—calves where you can't find the dam. Then you just don't brand them. Simple as pie."

The upper storey of the houses across the street caught the first rays of the rising moon. The light was reflected in the black window-panes; the bluish-white shimmering lent the red bricks a mysterious hue, at once aglow and obscured.

With the rising moon came the first breath of wind. It was faint, almost imperceptible, scarcely more than the movement of the air that is made by a walking man. The men felt it first upon their damp foreheads.

"Whew," they said, "that feels good." They turned to face the breeze; they opened their mouths and lifted their heads, so that the next breath of wind cooled their necks and lips and stroked the matted hair on their temples. Now the leaves in the trees began to rustle. Gradually the breeze swelled to a real night wind.

Jeremiah leaned against the wall of the house. He felt the keen air that came from the pastureland and he thought: The Lord has laid a heavy burden on my shoulders. It was hard to be alone, to know the right way and carry the truth within yourself, and to have only words by which to proclaim it. If only he could have shown it to them, if only the Lord would make it simple by repeatedly performing miracles. The worst was that the people in Montpelier hadn't believed the miracle in Bear Lake County; those who were farther away had been scornful, the people in Granger and in Riverton, and the townspeople in Cheyenne had refused even to listen.

"Do you believe that God can perform miracles, sister?" he asked.

"I don't know," Agnes replied. The men fell silent. When Jeremiah, too, did not speak at once, she added softly:

"I don't think I've ever thought much about it."

"Miracles are like nuts with hard shells. They hang on the trees and shine like gold. But we stand on the earth and look up and think we ought to have some of the nuts. Many people put their hands in their pockets and wait. Their mouths water and their bellies are empty and after a while anger comes into their hearts and poison to their lips. They are hungry and their children are hungry and they curse because the Lord sends no wind and the nuts hang motionless on the branches.

"And others kneel down and pray. They fold their hands and for days and nights they say words they do not understand. They light candles and build altars and think, 'If this doesn't please the Lord and He doesn't perform a miracle now, then He is not the Lord God who is Almighty.

"And others gather stones and throw them at the nuts. These are the violent ones, who know nothing at all of God and believe that with their fists they can strike what they desire out of His old hands, can obtain what in His wisdom He did not intend for them. And now and then a nut does fall to these men, and they rush upon it and kill each other for its own sake. And when the one who is left, the most violent of the violent men, opens it finally, he finds it empty or worm-eaten.

"But one among them all is close to the Lord. He throws his arms around the trunk of the tree, and lo! his arms are too short and do not surround the trunk. He clings to the bark with his feet, and the bark is brittle and affords no hold. He braces himself by his knees and thighs against the wood and digs into it with his fingernails, and inch by inch he clammers up the mighty trunk. He feels the blood coursing over his hands and the skin of his knees and thighs is rent. He feels his breath giving out and his strength vanishing. But he reaches the lowest branch, and from that he can climb to the next.

"But then he comes to a place where the wood is weak and gives under his weight. He falls until a stronger branch breaks his fall. His body is bloody and maimed, but his heart is strong and he knows the ways of God and begins anew.

"'He is a madman,' say those who stand upon the ground. 'Insane. Possessed. He believed in miracles. He thinks the Lord will allow him to reach the nuts. He has no muscle and his arms are too short and his bones are weak, and he thinks he will have the strength that none of us others had. He will break his neck. He mocks us, he offends us with his pretensions.' And they throw stones at him, and those who are praying condemn him because he is not like themselves.

"But he neither hears nor sees them, and finally he reaches the nuts. He shakes the branches and throws the golden fruits on the ground for all, and he himself keeps only a single one.

"And he returns to the others. Long before he reaches them, he hears them cry out. 'A miracle,' they cry, 'the Lord has worked a miracle. The weakest among us He has given strength and the greatest fool He has made His servant.'

"But he who performed the miracle crawls into a thicket in the woods and sleeps for exhaustion, and above him the Lord smiles."

Jeremiah fell silent. People were coming down the street. Already they were quite close. They were talking about the price of wool. Their voices had a curiously resounding tone. They walked in the middle of the street, and now and then they stood still when they had something particularly important to say.

The cowboys turned their heads and looked after them. Agnes looked too. She was still standing alone, out of the shadows, so that the two townspeople who were coming down the street at first saw only her figure. Abruptly they stopped conversing and slowed their pace. They strained their eyes to make out who it was standing there in the street at night. Then they discerned the motionless shadows of the cowboys behind her. They sensed something threatening in the stillness of the night, and in placating tones they mumbled, "Good evening." They did not listen for a reply; they kept their eyes fixed on the irregular pavement as though it was so dark they had to pick their way. Long after they were past the group, they felt between their shoulder blades the eyes of the cowboys. They did not breathe freely until they caught up to the other townspeople.

Then their tongues loosened again, and by ten that evening most of the inhabitants of Cheyenne knew that the schoolteacher, Agnes Andersen, associated with cowboys in the streets at night.

Around eleven o'clock, when Johnny bade her good night at her door, lights still shone in many windows; the townspeople could not make up their minds to go to bed. Even at midnight, when the men entered Sutherland's Bar, many wives still whispered the tale to their husbands in the privacy of their connubial beds.

Jeremiah had walked away from the cowboys and was gone before they noticed.

He was melancholy and lonesome. He was not strong enough, he thought; he had lost the way and no longer saw the light; he ought to turn back because the burden had proved too heavy for his weak shoulders. He longed for his fellows in Bear Lake County, for the fields and the huts and the eternal wind. The voice that had always spoken to him was becoming unclear; often it was quite silent. The stone walls all around him seemed to smother it.

He walked along the houses, brushing his hand now and then over the warm bricks as though seeking support. He walked on the side of the

street that was not lighted by the moon. After a while he came to the end of the houses and the open country began. He smelled dry grass; the earth became soft underfoot and his footsteps made only a low shuffling sound, not the harsh clicking that troubled him when he walked on pavestones. The moonlight hung like a veil over the fields; it was bright enough for him to see clearly.

Jeremiah sat down at the foot of an apple tree. It was pleasant to lean once more against a gnarled trunk. The grass was long and felt like straw. Jeremiah knew that it was brownish in colour, except near the ground; there, at the base, it had retained a little of its springtime green. He groped around. How good it felt to touch grass and leaves. He closed his eyes. Would he be able to recognize the various plants without looking? He smiled involuntarily. There was not much left at this time of year; most plants were withered. In the spring it was harder. But now there was little but devil's-claw, Russian thistle and shepherd's-purse. And pigweed, of course. Here and there was even some locoweed. Did his people in Bear Lake County know that locoweed was poisonous? Were they managing everything correctly?

Jeremiah closed his eyes. I must leave Cheyenne, he thought. I must go far away, where everything is simpler and clearer and where He can speak with me as He speaks with me out here. I can't stay where the walls smother every word. I must go where men are in distress. He thought of the locust swarm that had flown over the town. Should he take a chance and try to follow it? Perhaps he would find villages where the farmers were in despair. Where they were waiting for him, where they were praying for a miracle while the locusts devoured their crops. Perhaps children were crying even now because they were hungry, and the men were wondering whether they had better slaughter the last cow before it died in its stall.

What business did he have in Sutherland's place? Who needed him and his strength in Cheyenne?

Really, who needed Preacher Jeremiah Kentrup in Cheyenne?

The morning was cool. At dawn a few streaming clouds had hung in the sky, but they dissolved as soon as the sun rose a little higher. When they were gone, they revealed a clear and gleaming sky that was reflected harshly on the wet roofs and pavestones.

The air was redolent of fresh mountain springs; it was so bright and clear that all objects seemed near. Things showed with all their angles and irregularities, with all the play of light and shadow upon them. After a time the roofs and stones dried and everything was restored to its natural colour; things looked as they really were and stood in their rightful places; the school and the courthouse and the new City Hall that had cost eleven thousand dollars, the National Bank and all the dwelling

houses of the town. It was bright morning now and the sun shone; this was the town of Cheyenne, two hundred and thirty miles from the mines in the Black Hills, six days' journey from Spotted Tail and seven days from Red Cloud. This was the town of Cheyenne, and things that were wrong in other towns were no less wrong here in Cheyenne.

"It won't do," the men said, shaking their heads and looking smugly across the white tablecloths on their breakfast tables. They tucked their napkins in their vests, sighed and noisily sipped their steaming coffee. They gazed over their spectacles at their wives and saw that their wives' lips were compressed and their noses sharp. And again they shook their heads and again they said, "It won't do."

The children noticed that something was in the air. But they had no idea what it was, and they did not ask. They sat in their chairs, swinging their legs under the tables, swallowing the food that was set before them; and then they took their books and slates and went to school.

Agnes Andersen also went to school.

"Hello, Bobby," she said when she met a child on the way, or "Good morning, Evelyn," or "How are you, Jimmy?" And the children answered, "Good morning, Miss Andersen." They walked along beside Agnes, talking constrainedly and looking up at the teacher to see whether she was smiling at what they were saying. When she smiled, they said it again, and then another child said something similar, and a third and a fourth, until they had exploited all the smile there was in it.

The people who peeped out through their curtains found nothing unusual. A hard-boiled customer, this schoolteacher, they thought. Runs around with the cowboys at night and by day walks to school with the kids with her face all innocence. Behaves as though there was nothing to it all. And what modest eyes, and how demurely she's dressed, and how plainly she does her hair!

The Editor of the *Cheyenne News* met her on the street, walking with the children. He greeted her as usual, waving his plump hand to her. His thoughts dwelt on the neat little notice he was going to run. Nothing direct, just a barbed allusion. It was ever so much more elegant to ruin a person with a single sentence than to write a whole, heavy-handed article. He could leave the articles to his readers. His readers wanted to smack their lips in satisfaction. They wanted to enjoy their malice as a delicacy. Well, it was his business to give them what they wanted. Moreover, he enjoyed it.

"The Principal wants to talk to you," Roberts, one of the few male teachers, said to Agnes when she entered the school building.

"Oh," Agnes said. She brushed her hand over her hair. She felt quite calm. She had done nothing wrong. She did not know yet what she would say, but she felt it would not be difficult to defend herself when there was no real accusation against her.

"By the way, Agnes . . ." Roberts began, stepping toward the window so that she could not see his face.

He was a small man with a timid voice. He drummed his fingers hesitantly against the window-pane. The light pierced his ears and made them shine pinkishly. He groped for words.

"What I want to say," he went on finally, "I think you know what it's about. But I thought I ought to warn you. It's none of my affair, of course . . . please don't think I'm interfering in your business . . . only you ought to be careful. Damned careful. Pardon the way I put it, but you ought to be damned careful."

He fell silent and did not turn to face her. His fingers beat steadily against the pane. It was warm in the room. Unbearably warm and stuffy.

Agnes still stood with her hand on the latch. She coughed lightly. The windows need a cleaning, she thought. Frightfully spotted. And dust everywhere. The room ought to have a picture on the wall, too.

"Thank you," she said. She wanted to add some friendly remark, but nothing occurred to her.

She opened the door and entered the corridor. From the classrooms along the hall came the buzz of children's voices. Agnes walked past the windows that looked out over the court. It was empty except for a dog that was running around, sniffing eagerly.

At the end of the corridor was the Principal's office. It was dark here, and her eyes were still filled with the sunlight. She had to grope for the latch.

Agnes knocked.

"Come in."

"Good morning, Mr. Cooper," Agnes said, entering.

"Ah, Miss Andersen." The Principal leaned back in his chair. He had a thin, pallid face, with almost hairless eyelids and a long, narrow nose. He scarcely moved his thin lips when he spoke.

"Please sit down." He propped the bony fingers of his hands together and stared at his fingernails as he spoke.

"This is an embarrassing matter and I find it difficult to discuss it. We don't have the right to interfere in anyone's private affairs. Everyone can live his own life and none of us is a saint. But there are limits, Miss Andersen. If the cowboys are to your taste, that's your own affair. For all I know there are perfectly decent fellows among them. But it is certainly not proper that you spend your time with a whole crowd of them in the darkness of the night. You're not just anybody, Miss Andersen; you're Agnes Andersen the teacher. You understand, Miss Andersen. One must keep up appearances. You need account only to yourself for what you do when no one sees you. For the rest, we must guard our interests."

He rocked slowly back and forth in his chair. Every time he rocked back,

there was a scraping sound. Finally he sat straight and crossed his legs.

"Well?" he asked.

"I've done nothing wrong, Mr. Cooper," Agnes said. Her voice was hoarse. She sat very erect, her hands on her knees. Through the window she saw the leaves of a tree. "Or is it wrong to listen to a preacher?"

"If you mean the one with the red beard, the word 'preacher' doesn't quite suit, you know. We must not confuse adventurers and swindlers with preachers."

"He is not a swindler."

"You must not jump to conclusions, my dear young lady. You must remember that there are clergymen in this town whose judgment ought to carry more weight in such a matter than yours. But again I say, that is your own affair. If you wish to believe that a tramp is a messiah, I can only feel sorry for you, but as long as you do so without a public scandal it's none of my affair. But when there is danger of a scandal, as there is in your case, I will do everything in my power to avert it in time. I think that in the end you will realize what is to your own best interests. I hope I don't have to make myself clearer."

"No," Agnes replied. "I knew what to expect. I didn't need you to tell me. But there's this to add, Mr. Cooper, though I don't suppose you can understand it. I went to listen to the preacher nevertheless. Even though I knew it, I stood with the cowboys and listened to him, and I will always do that, again and again. I don't care what they say about me. I don't care whether I lose my job. It isn't the highest good on earth to be a teacher in your school, Mr. Cooper——"

"Miss Andersen, control yourself," Cooper interrupted her.

"Don't worry. I know perfectly well what I'm saying," Agnes said, her voice so low that Cooper had to stop rocking his chair in order to hear her. "I have no reason to get excited. I find it easy to smile, to speak to to you, as Jeremiah, the preacher, would speak to you. As one speaks to simple-minded children."

"Miss Andersen, I warn you . . ."

"What do you wish to warn me against, Mr. Cooper?" Agnes asked. She did smile. "You want to say you're going to fire me if I don't keep quiet. That you'll blacklist me. You have it in your power. But what can you do if I refuse to be intimidated and am prepared for it? Then am I not stronger than you? What are you then but a poor, helpless old man who can do nothing but look on while Agnes Andersen follows at the heels of the vagabond preacher, Jeremiah Kentrup? While I stand publicly beside him in broad daylight and proclaim the truth. And while I bear testimony of the strength that dwells within me because I am going the right way and have found my way back to the true source. What can you do then? Poor Principal Cooper, who can do nothing at all!"

As she spoke these last words, Agnes stood up. She folded her hands on the back of the chair and coughed. Her eyes were wide and shining, her cheeks flushed. Her lips alone remained pale.

Cooper sat motionless, gazing past the young woman. He frowned superciliously. He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, lowered his almost naked lids over his eyes and rubbed his middle finger over his black, threadlike moustache.

"I assume this means your resignation from our employ," he said.

Agnes did not reply. Slowly she walked toward the door. She put out her hand toward the latch. Suddenly she felt dizzy; she had to cling to something. The cool metal felt good under her fingers. She pressed the latch down. She had to press hard; it had not been oiled for a long time. The spring squeaked. When she had pressed it all the way down, the door sprang ajar. A draught of cool air entered. She pushed and saw the dim corridor before her. She heard the voices of children chattering in one of the classrooms. Hers. They're waiting for me, she thought.

But she walked straight ahead, without turning, and went out of the schoolhouse.

She met Jeremiah toward noon when he left the carpenter's shop where he worked to earn the few cents he needed to live.

She stood under a tree, with the shadows of the leaves drawing patterns on her bright summer dress. Her face was pale. She stood motionless, but her eyes were restless.

"Good morning, Miss Andersen," Jeremiah said.

She nodded reply. She wanted to say that she had been waiting for him, but she could not. Her whole body felt weak and she was afraid her legs would buckle under her. She leaned against the trunk of the tree. The air was warm and still. There was no one else in the street.

"Is anything the matter?" Jeremiah asked, concerned.

She shook her head slowly. "No," she said. "Just that I've been standing too long in one spot."

There was a pause. "Didn't you go to school?" Jeremiah asked finally.

"Oh, yes. But only for a few minutes."

"Has something happened?"

"I won't be teaching any more."

"Because of last night?"

Agnes smiled. "Oh, no," she said. "Not because of last night."

Jeremiah looked at her, puzzled. Her eyes were almost closed. She looked frail and gentle, and her smile was still there, unchanged.

"Won't you tell me why?" Jeremiah asked.

"Because I belong to you, if you need me." She spoke without opening her eyes.

"We need everyone," Jeremiah replied after a while.

"Then may I go with you?"

Jeremiah shook his head. "No," he said, his voice quiet and friendly, "you cannot go with me. No, no, you can't do that."

"Then where shall I go?"

"To the others. To our settlement. Up there they can use every brain and every hand. They must fight anew for their lives every day. The wind is cruel, but the soil is wonderful. In the valleys vegetables grow, and meadows cover the slopes of the hills. Everywhere they are building new houses and laying out new gardens. Maybe soon there will be a school and a temple. But some day a new disaster will come upon them and they will be alone if there is no one there to support them. It will be easier than it was the last time. But they'll say, 'After all, last time it was only locusts. But this time it's the plague or cholera or the corn borer.' And then they will——"

"No," Agnes interrupted him.

The smile had faded from her lips. Her teeth were clenched over her lower lip and the lines at the corners of her mouth were definite shadows. She coughed. The strain lent a rosy shimmer to her pale cheeks. With a small handkerchief she wiped the tears from her eyes. "I beg your pardon," she said. "I'm all right now. It's nothing, nothing serious."

She adjusted her hat and brushed a speck of dust from her blouse. "You see," she said, without looking at Jeremiah, "I can't go to your settlement. I don't want to do the same thing there that I've done here. Perhaps I'm all wrong that I've all at once found the way to God. Maybe I simply can't go on here, the way things are. I just have to begin another life or I'll be stifled. Maybe I was only attracted by the adventure when I said I wanted to go with you. Of course, that's all it was."

She spoke hastily. She unbuttoned the sleeves of her blouse, smoothed the cloth and buttoned them again.

"Let's not talk about it any more, Jeremiah. Women have their whims. Anyway, I've been thinking for a long time about throwing up this job here. Maybe I want to get married." She paused for a moment, then added, "Maybe I'll really get married."

The area of high atmospheric pressure over the states of the North-west was unusually stationary. Instead of moving eastward with an average speed of some five hundred miles a day, it hung motionless above the earth. In consequence, the sun rose in a cloudless sky, the streams dried up and the cattle thirsted. The yield of milk from the cows dropped from fifteen quarts a day to eight and nine, which was no more than winter production. Prices rose, and the farmers who had no wells grumbled and looked gloomily at the sky. They filled all the pails they possessed from the stagnant pools that were still to be found among the stones of the stream beds, brought pails to their barns and covered them with rocks to

slow evaporation. They reflected that it would have been better had they dug wells when they were advised to do so. But pumps were so expensive and it had seemed better to buy a few more head of cattle or sacks of seed. After all, they had a brook on their land, with wild iris and cattails growing along its banks. That was a sign that the soil was always moist. And it always had been, since they came. Only this year it was different. They frowned and told their wives it didn't help to get forty and fifty cents a gallon for milk; they would have to do something or the cows would starve to death.

But the sky remained clear and unchanging. Mornings it was silvery, afternoons blue and evenings like red gold. Late in the day a light breeze arose and everything dried out even faster than before.

The locusts, which had been migrating for many days, moved forward very slowly now. Sometimes, over forests, they encountered stray air currents. Then the whole swarm sagged low and moved faster. But soon they slowed again.

From below they looked like a diaphanous cloud. In the air they behaved no differently than they had upon the ground. They collided with one another, sat upon one another, knocked each other off course with their whirring wings, pressed their smaller and weaker fellows downward. But never did they waver from their general direction. Their small eyes were calm and immobile as ever; from their soft abdomens their excrement trickled to earth, and from their mouths dripped their brown spittle. Their sensitive nostrils smelled the fragrance of the fields, and day after day they grew hungrier and less satisfied with the meals they had at their way stations. But they grew no weaker and they remained no longer than usual on the sparse meadows and the parched pastures, or among the hazel-nut bushes and huckleberry leaves. As soon as the sun rose, they flew on.

Johnny Brown sat on a packing crate, his arms propped on his knees and his head resting between his clenched fists. He watched the men loading the cattle.

He was through with Cheyenne. He had had enough. It was time he moved on. There was nothing more he could learn from the cowboys. What he didn't know now he would have to pick up from his own experience.

He had decided on Texas cattle. He had money enough to buy a whole herd, with all the appurtenances. He had spent almost nothing in Cheyenne. He'd kept his powder dry, and the few drinks he had stood the boys didn't matter. The card tables had got along without him; he hadn't even bought Agnes her gold chain.

He would ride down into Texas, pick out the cattle he wanted and return with them. He'd made up his mind to stay in the neighbourhood

of Cheyenne. The pastures there were as good as anywhere else. He'd seen that himself. The grass was already turning to hay on the ground, and even in winter one could keep the cattle pastured. Stables weren't necessary. He'd put up a couple of houses for himself and the boys. A hundred dollars apiece they'd cost, at most. You could spend more on them if you wanted to have a little more style. But what for? Better to go it cheap in the beginning. Better buy a few more cows.

Johnny looked around. Work was going slowly to-day. He couldn't even see to the end of the line and it was already noon. If it went on this way, they'd have a lot left over by evening. Maybe not enough cars had been brought in. Or maybe it was just the heat and last night's drinking and this hot breeze that made you so tired you wanted to lie down and sleep where you were.

Johnny stood up. He went over to the animals. The steers they were loading hadn't reached their full weight. It was hard to say why they were being sold. Didn't stand more than eleven hundred pounds, probably a good deal less. At three cents a pound that made less than thirty dollars a head. Of course you could make a neat profit even at that. Still, nobody who could hold off a while would let them go at that price. Certainly not in June or July. In September, with winter near, it was another matter. Too bad. A shame for anyone to throw away money like that.

He strolled over to Greene and the others. Then he saw that something was wrong.

The men were standing around a steer, trying to force it up the planks and into the freight car. Their faces were dripping with sweat and their eyes bloodshot from exertion.

The animal had spread its forelegs. Its head was lowered and it was panting stertorously. Its dark-brown eyes were wide and terror-stricken. Its hide was damp; the men kept wiping their hands on their chaps.

When Johnny came over to them, they paused in their efforts. They straightened up and rubbed their sleeves over their faces.

"Damn bastards," Greene said.

"Not one of them will move by himself to-day," Canari complained.

"Come on, boys, get along there," cried a man wearing a straw hat who stood at the door of the car, writing pad in hand. He had a small pale face and wore pince-nez.

"Shut y'r trap," Greene growled.

The man did not reply. With his handkerchief he wiped the sweat from under his collar. He pushed back his straw hat and gazed past Greene at the ox, which was still standing immobile, and at the other cattle behind it.

"Hey, look at them," he called, pointing to the herd.

The men looked around. They were standing at the lower end of the

board ramp that led into the car. They stood on tiptoe to see better. Something was wrong with the cattle. Something had been wrong all day. Trouble getting them into the car. They'd had to wear themselves out on every one of the beasts. For some reason every animal had been terrified, afraid to move.

But now the fear had gripped the whole herd at once. They no longer stood and waited. They had begun to move. Not that they were running, stampeding over the fields or into the streets of Cheyenne. The fear that had seized them was too strong for flight. They wanted to crowd together for support, feel the bodies of the others around them, feel their fellows' moist, warm hides, their trembling, their movements, their breathing.

They began to bellow. They stretched their heads forward and upward and opened their mouths. The cries mingled into a thunderous tone that was inorganic in its quality. A heavy cloud of dust lay over them. The wind seemed to have ceased abruptly. Their exhalations began to spoil the air. They crowded into an ever-narrowing space. Their great bellies and heads and their dainty legs compressed into a close tangle.

"They're crushing the ones in the middle!" Greene shouted.

He ran toward the animals, stick in hand. Johnny and the others followed him, also clutching sticks. The man in the straw hat alone remained by the freight car. He began to chew his fingernails. When he saw the men flailing away at the cattle with their sticks, he closed his eyes. He retched.

Trembling, immobile, with widespread forelegs and lowered head, stood the steer the men had been trying to drive up the ramp.

The cattle on the edges shrank away when the first blows fell. They tried to move to one side. The pressure of their bodies on the whole mass diminished. A small gap formed between them and their immediate neighbours, and through this gap Greene slipped. He had to get to the centre, or as close to the centre as possible, to force them apart. The tremendous pressure on the animals in the middle was crushing their ribs. He had to break them up, beat them until they forgot their fear and tried to flee from the blows. Then they would force the others outward.

He struck wildly with his stick, careless where his blows fell. He hit their heads, their necks, their backs. He kicked them in the sides, and struck and struck. The cows and steers shrank away and tried to evade the blows; more and more small gaps were formed, and through these he penetrated deeper into the herd.

The others, too, were forcing their way in. Sometimes the animals stood twitching under the blows, trying to rear up and avoid them, but unable to move because they were locked fast between the bodies of those around them. Then the men had to work around them, free the edges first. But sometimes they could not. Then they crawled under the

bellies of the beasts, forced their way in front of them, braced themselves against the horns and tried to push them back a little.

And the flies too seemed to have gone mad. Masses of them clung to the heads, backs, flanks and necks of the cattle. They sucked blood until they were bloated and intoxicated. When the men came, they buzzed into the air and a few lighted on the men's bare arms and their sun-browned necks. They bit hard, and the men struck at them.

And the men struck the cattle until their muscles ached. The dust had settled in their faces and mingled with their sweat to form a crust over which new drops of sweat ran. Their skin began to itch, especially at the nape of the neck, and on their chests and under their chins. When their left hands happened to be free, they scratched themselves. They could feel the crust of dirt on their skins. It was rough, and when they scratched it came off like clotted blood.

The farther they worked their way the more lifeless animals they found. They would have to determine later whether they were dead. They certainly looked it. But perhaps they were only insensible and would recover. They lay on the ground with open eyes and tongues hanging out, and sometimes the others had stepped on them and there were small wounds in their gleaming brown hides, with blood trickling slowly out.

Greene and Johnny worked close together. To communicate they had to shout. At first they had called out a few words. Yes, Greene had once experienced something similar. Cattle behaved this way when there were wolves in the neighbourhood. And sometimes before a storm. But he'd never seen it happen with a clear sky.

Then both men fell silent. You couldn't talk and strike and brace yourself against massive bodies and swallow dust at the same time. Time enough for talking when it was all over. No time for Johnny, though. He wanted to get away. He had no more time to waste. For the present he was through with Cheyenne. He knew what he wanted. He would come back. Maybe. That depended. Depended on how he liked Ellsworth, Texas. And then it depended on the cattle and the pastures down there. He would decide after he had seen.

"Hey there!" Greene bawled.

"What?"

"Look up at the sky."

Johnny looked up. At first he saw nothing unusual. The sun blinded him and the sky itself was so dazzling that he could scarcely keep his eyes open. Then he saw what Greene meant.

"Jeremiah's locusts!" he shouted, holding his hand over his eyes. For a moment he paid no attention to the herd.

"Yes."

"Do you believe in them?"

"Yes, they're locusts all right."

"Couldn't it be dust or a cloud?"

"What do you think has made the cattle crazy?"

The men set to work again. Was it possible? Johnny wondered. Was such a swarm, bigger than a thundercloud, really possible? Had they let Jeremiah's talk turn their heads? Might he not be spinning them a yarn? Fooling him and Greene and Baker and Agnes, who was running out every night just to hear him talk. Maybe he was handing them a tall tale. Putting a spell on them, sort of.

After a while the animals grew quiet. Their bellowing became feebler and they moved away from one another. Their step was halting, but more gaps formed between them. Their eyes were tired and their heads bowed. Their sweat-soaked hides were dried by a soft breeze.

The ground was coated with a repulsive slime of trampled excrement. Between the small puddles of their urine and the mounds of their droppings lay exhausted or injured or dead animals.

The men's eyes were burning. Their lips were dry and their shirts were glued to their bodies. They still held in their hands the sticks with which they had beaten the cattle. With heavy boots they plodded through the puddles and the slime, and when they found a dead animal they bound a rope around its legs and dragged it aside. Then they brought big wooden tubs from a lean-to. They needed water for the insensible animals. Maybe some of them would recover. They had to try, anyway.

"How long am I supposed to wait here?" cried the little man in the straw hat when they passed him.

They did not answer him. Each pair of men carried one of the wooden tubs between them. They walked slowly over the broad, sunny yard. Cow dung clung to their boots, and their faces were weary and dirty. Sometimes they spat because they had a bad taste in their mouths or sand between their teeth.

"Look who's there," Greene said softly to Johnny.

Johnny raised his head. His eyes hurt from the reflection of the light on the pavement. Then he recognized Agnes and at the same time he noticed how hot it was. So hot that the air shimmered over the stones. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand because they felt full of dust. He saw that she was alone and that he would have to pass her if he wanted to go to the well with the others.

"I think she's waiting for you," Greene said.

"Maybe."

Johnny gazed straight ahead again. He saw his shadow scurrying over the pavement before him. It was a small, distorted image of himself; it flowed over all the irregularities, dipped into the cracks and crawled through the holes, approaching closer and closer to the edge of the pavement and the place where the girl stood.

"Good day, miss," the men said, without stopping.

"I'd like to speak with you for a moment, Mr. Brown," Agnes said.

"Sure," Johnny said. He stopped, and Greene stopped beside him because they were carrying the wooden tub between them.

"I'll take it the rest of the way," Greene said. He hoisted the heavy wooden vessel on his shoulder.

Johnny gazed after him for a moment. Then he turned. "Good guy, Greene."

Agnes did not answer. She was pale. Her eyes were quiet, her lips compressed, and there were fine lines flaring down from her nostrils to her chin.

Johnny twisted his hat in his hand. His fingers were brown and dirty and his hat soaked with sweat. A fat fly crawled on the brim.

"I'm not teaching school any more," Agnes said after a while.

Johnny abruptly stopped twisting his hat. He looked at Agnes and saw that she was smiling faintly. It seemed strange that she should be so calm and unmoved by what had happened. Could he have heard wrong?

"What's that?" he asked.

Agnes nodded. "Yes," she said, "they've thrown me out. This morning, right away. Simply fired me."

"Fired you?"

"Well, I could have stayed if I had really wanted to. If I'd pleaded with them. If I'd seen the error of my ways and repented."

She coughed, wondering what else she could say. She watched a beetle crawling slowly across Johnny's shadow. When it came to the edge, it faltered. With its antennæ it reached out beyond the rim of the shadow, discovered that the land beyond was hot and sunny and turned back. She wondered what it was called. Perhaps she would look it up. She ought to know. A child might ask some day. She shook her head.

"So they fired you," Johnny said. He swatted the fly that had settled on his hand. "Well . . ."

Both fell silent. They gazed past each other and did not move. They heard the animals bellowing for their water, and in the distance the voices of the returning men.

"Isn't it awfully hot?" Agnes asked softly. "Can't we go somewhere in the shade? Or must you go back to the cattle with the others?"

"No," Johnny said, putting his hat on.

"Where shall we go?"

"I don't know. Away from here. That is, if you don't mind my going with you."

She shook her head and fell into step with him. Her steps were small and her shoes clicked in a high tone over the pavement. Their shadows floated along ahead of them, and because the sun was coming from one side they seemed to be touching.

When Johnny took her in his arms and kissed her for the first time, she closed her eyes. She thought of Jeremiah.

They were married next day by a pastor of the Episcopal Church.

When they came out on the street after the ceremony, there were small white clouds in the sky. Now and then one of them passed across the face of the sun. Then the main street of Cheyenne lay in the shade and the light breeze whirled puffs of dust into the air.

The stores were open and the women were busy shopping. The men sat in their offices. They had opened the windows, and when the wind blew it upset the papers on their desks.

The big cattleyard where the freight cars were loaded was deserted. The puddles had dried, and the sun had converted the mounds of cow dung into hard, flat cakes. The box where Johnny had sat the day before still stood in the same place. A locomotive moved cars back and forth along the railroad spur and the wind carried the grey clouds of smoke over to the dwelling houses, where the soot settled on window sills.

Under the trees the children played hide-and-go-seek. They pillowed their heads against their arms, closed their eyes and counted breathlessly to a hundred. Then they looked up and began to search for the others. They had just got a new teacher because the old one had been thrown out. Really thrown out and they mustn't tip their caps to her or greet her. The new teacher wasn't a teacher at all, just the pastor's wife, who wore glasses and had a big pimple on her nose.

The restaurants had their doors open and the cats sat on the thresholds and rubbed their noses with their paws. The restaurant owners leaned on the counters reading a newspaper. Whenever a shadow fell across the open door they looked up. Then they lost their place and had to begin again.

When they saw Johnny and the schoolteacher walking by arm in arm, they stared in amazement. They wound their way along behind the counters to the rear and called their wives.

Their wives had red, perspiring faces from standing at the stoves. Their eyes were shining and their hair was straggly. They dried their hands on their aprons and ran their tongues over their lips. They looked after the couple. The children stopped playing and stood defiant, without greeting, along the curbs. The storekeepers called their customers' attention to what was happening, and the clerks who had been gazing out office windows in boredom hurried to their bosses.

The two entered a jeweller's shop. "She caught a rich fish," the people said, and waited. "No ordinary cowboy, not for her. He's worth his weight in gold. Going to buy a herd down in Texas. Plans to buy thousands of head of cattle. Then he's coming up here. Going to live here in Cheyenne. He'll build her a mansion. A regular palace."

They stood in groups pretending to be talking idly, but they kept their eyes fixed on the door of the jeweller's shop. If it was true about his money, it was just as well to be careful. If Smith and Taylor didn't want to say hello to them, that was their business. They were always too blunt, anyway, always trying to run their heads through a wall. You had to be smooth if you wanted to get on in the world. You had to swim with the stream, howl with the wolves.

Johnny bought his wife a gold chain. The smallest and finest the jeweller had. It flowed warm and delicate on her pale skin.

"Come again soon," the jeweller said when Johnny paid him.

"Sorry, we won't," Johnny said, "we're leaving this evening. Going to Texas. We're buying a herd. Couple of thousand head. Then we'll come back. Maybe we'll come back."

"It's pretty nice here," the jeweller said. "Miss Andersen knows our town."

"You mean Mrs. Brown?" Johnny asked.

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I . . ."

"That's all right," Agnes said. "Sometimes I can't believe it myself."

The clouds that had floated over the city all day had now assembled in the west. Their puffy whiteness changed to grey, as though they had grown heavy with age. In the distance they flowed together, and at the horizon they were no longer visible as clouds. There the sky was a uniform grey.

Higher up, however, they retained their previous forms. They lay beside one another as the wind had driven them. Downy and rotund, they hung motionless over the land.

Jeremiah glanced up at the clouds frequently. He rode an old horse he had bought. It was a worn roan with a dirty grey mane that had plodded for years before the plough. Then it had abruptly failed its owners. Its knees had trembled, given way, and it had fallen. It had lain panting and helpless on the hard, dry earth. The farmers had looked at it and shaken their heads. They had reckoned how old the beast must be and muttered that it was no wonder the horse couldn't drag the plough through this damn parched soil. Because they were good-hearted, they had helped it to its feet and led it back to its stable. They had fed it, although it no longer earned its feed. But often they had talked about taking it to the skinner, because it ate almost as much as a working horse.

Jeremiah, who now and then had done a little work for these farmers, bought it for a few dollars. After all, they said, it's a good beast. Too weak for the fields, but all right for riding. Its hoofs are fresh. And look at the teeth. Good as a two-year-old's. And it stands firm. Then they led it out of the stable and tied an old blanket instead of a saddle on its back. It stood quiet, its hair hanging over its face and its eyes big and

mournful. They patted its throat and Jeremiah gazed at it with kindness. Then he clambered on its back and rode slowly away from the group of farmers.

The farmers gazed after him as long as he was in sight. Then they shook their heads and went back to the barn. The place where the horse had stood was empty. It was a small stall at the end of the barn and you scarcely noticed it was empty unless you looked sharp. But the farmers knew.

When Jeremiah glanced up at the clouds again, he saw that they had come nearer. And they were darker now; they no longer lay peacefully together. The wind had piled them up and massed the delicate forms of single clouds into ominous monsters. Their peaks reached high into the sky, and the sun yellowed them so that on their fringes they looked like innocuous noonday clouds. But their massive bellies were dark grey and heavy.

Several times Jeremiah turned and looked back at the city. He had left unobserved. Perhaps the people would wonder for the next few days. "Where'd that red-bearded preacher go off to?" Since no one knew, they would shrug and forget him. He had left nothing behind. The words he had spoken were dead long since. They had never really lived. The walls had taken from them the breath of life; they had been feeble and pallid from the very first.

Jeremiah smiled. He listened to what went on within him and he heard the old gentle voice again. He heard the dry earth crumbling under the hoofs of his horse and a bird chirping in the grass. A lizard scrambled through withered leaves that had collected in a wagon rut. The dust kicked up by the heavy hoofs of the horse was carried over the plain like a fine mist. Jeremiah saw that the soil was cracked and wrinkled, yet soft as velvet. He observed ants building little mounds of sand, and beetles peeping out of cracks in the ground, and moles and field mice, darting timorously into their holes. The air smelled of hay and dry flowers and hot stones. And Jeremiah knew he was on the right path.

The space between clouds and sun had shrunk greatly. White streaks like streamers of smoke were crawling across the sky. The air shimmered as after a rain.

Before Jeremiah lay a valley. He dismounted and led his horse by the reins. In pace with him, the animal descended the gentle slope. The wind had died and the dust hung motionless in the air behind the pair. After a while it sank back to earth almost on the spot where it had whirled up. The horse snorted. Its hoofs scraped the ground and sometimes loosened small stones which rolled ahead of them.

As they went lower into the valley, the stillness around them grew more profound.

Finally they came to a stone hearth some traveller had made. In a small sack Jeremiah carried provisions, but he was not hungry. He wanted to rest. To sit on the ground, lean his back against something and let the horse graze.

He tied the animal to the stump of a tree, leaving the line long so that he would have ample pasture. The grass was not withered, but it was tough and grew in bunches; it had none of the tenderness of the meadows in Bear Lake County. The horse snorted and nosed the grass; then it took the blades between its teeth and began grinding them.

Jeremiah sat down and leaned against the stump. The wood was dry and loose, and when Jeremiah touched it pieces of bark and bits of moss trickled down on his head.

It was growing dark. The sky was grey and seemed almost to touch the ground. Jeremiah folded his hands in his lap and settled his head back. He heard through the bark the crawling of ants and centipedes, and at his side the contented grazing of the horse. He closed his eyes. The wood was pleasantly warm against his back and the grass soft as down.

The Lord was with him, and Jeremiah smiled.

He awakened when the first raindrops fell upon his forehead. He had slept for only a few moments. The horse was still standing where he had last seen it. Its head was down and it was feeding busily. When he stood up, it raised its head and looked at him. He took the blanket that had served as his saddle during the day and spread it over the horse's back. It was too short to cover the animal, and too thin and torn to protect it very well from the rain.

It had become still darker; the air seemed to be utterly still. The rustle in the grass came from the rain, not from wind. When the raindrops struck the blades of grass they trembled visibly.

Jeremiah sat down by the stump again. He took off his shoes and stockings. After a while he felt water running over his ankles. It was a gentle rain, and needed. The horse was still feeding. Sometimes it ran its big red tongue over the grass and licked up the drops of water. Jeremiah, too, was thirsty.

When the rain fell stronger, Jeremiah stretched out his hands and let the drops gather in his palms. He drank with deliberation.

He did not think of the sack of provisions until the burlap bag was soaked through. It felt hard and heavy and smelled of mould.

He pulled his shoes on over his bare feet and took the sack to the stone hearth. He laid it on two half-burnt logs, leaving a space between them so that the air could circulate and dry the bag. Then he built a kind of roof over it out of stones, twigs and clumps of grass. Over this he spread his coat. That would save some of the food, if it didn't rain too long, if there was no storm, and if it wasn't already too late.

Meanwhile it had become quite dark. Jeremiah shivered, although the air was warm and windless. His whole body felt wet and cold. In some places the wetness was like a slimy finger running over his skin, making him shudder at the touch; at other places it was like a clinging leech; then, as though he was stuck against something repulsive. Or else it was simply wetness and slipperiness.

He groped his way back to the stump. When he placed his hand against the bark for support, he felt a spongy wetness. It seemed to be covered with a layer of slime. He leaned against the wood without sitting down. He was afraid of the grass, which must be drenched by now. Where could the horse be? He listened, holding his breath the better to hear. He heard nothing but the rain.

For a while he stood still. Perhaps the horse had gone to sleep. Perhaps it had lain down in the grass, or was standing somewhere alone in the darkness, head drooping, water running out of its grey mane and over its neck and chest and legs. Perhaps it was afraid because it was alone and not in its stall on the farm.

Jeremiah groped for the line with which he had tied it to the stump. It was slack. He drew gently on it. He heard the sound of hoofs on the wet ground as they kicked little stones and thudded in the wet grass, and then the horse was beside him. It was too dark for him to see much of it. It was only a big shadow hovering over the grass. But when he touched it, he felt the warm skin underneath a coat of cold water. The horse came closer to him and nudged his shoulder with its muzzle. "Sure, boy," Jeremiah said, and rubbed the water from its neck and chest.

After a while he whispered again, low and consolingly, "Sure, boy."

At daybreak it was still raining. Small drops fell from an unbroken, grey sky. They gathered in holes and became puddles. After a while the puddles overflowed and trickled down the slope into the valley. They flowed together and became a small stream in which the grey sky and the half-withered hazel-nut bushes were reflected.

Jeremiah was awakened by the horse, which was shaking water from its mane. He opened his eyes and saw that it was day. His face burned from the night of rain and his hands were shaking from the cold that had penetrated his body. The horse did not move. It stood gazing at him with drooping head. Its eyes were sad and patient. It waited.

Stiff-legged, Jeremiah went to his sack of provisions. It was the same as the night before, except that the rain had soaked through coat and grass and twigs and stones. The sack looked like some drowned creature that the sea had spilled forth upon the land.

He was hungry. He tried to open the sack. The cord was swollen and the knot had become a hard lump. Finally he cut it with his knife.

As he was reaching into the sack, he heard someone speaking in the

distance. The sound was scarcely audible. But the valley was very quiet in spite of the rustling of the rain, and the sound of a human voice was rather frightening.

Jeremiah looked up. Over the valley hung a grey curtain of rain. All colours interflowed; the grass looked like the shrubs and the shrubs like the earth, which was dirty brown. The water alone shone with a faint reflection of the sky as it ran in the wheel ruts of the trail.

Far up on the brow of the slope he saw men and horses. For a while he could see them clearly because they were outlined against the clouds. But when they topped the brow and began descending, they became colourless shadows moving without sound. Their voices came to him with increasing distinctness as they approached.

When they were halfway down to his camp, they came to a small, naked ridge. Here he saw them clearly again, and was able to make out their figures. A man was in the lead. Behind him followed a horse with what seemed to be another man upon it. A tarpaulin was spread over the shoulders of this one, covering him like a tent. Behind these two came two more horses, one bearing a heavy pack and the other only a saddle. The two horses stopped at the ridge. Jeremiah heard the man calling them. They did not move, and he went back to fetch them.

Suddenly Jeremiah realized who the man was. He saw him standing before him in Sutherland's Bar, and then going out on the street with him the morning the locust swarm flew over the city. He recalled the man's broad shoulders and his heavy gait, and finally he recalled his name.

"Hello," he cried. "Hey there! Hello, Johnny."

He paused after each word and drew out the syllables. When the man turned, he raised his arm and waved.

Johnny did not recognize him. He stood motionless for a while, gazing down into the valley. Then he funnelled his hands and called:

"Who is it?"

"Jeremiah."

The sound of his voice faded and Jeremiah waited for an answer. But there was only silence; the conversation between Johnny and his companion had ceased. Slowly they approached. Jeremiah glanced up at them now and then while he felt through his soaked provisions. His flour was wet and lumpy, the bread soft, but the bacon and smoked meat were still edible.

He heard the hoofs of the horse, the splashing of puddles and the creaking of harness near by, and he stood up to approach them. When he saw that it was Agnes who rode under the canvas, he stood still.

"Miss Andersen?" he said, a low undertone of dismay in his voice.

"No," Johnny said, "don't worry. Mrs. Brown. Mrs. Johnny Brown."

The rain was abating. Here and there the sky grew brighter. The grey layer of clouds thinned and a pale light trickled through.

"Hello, Jeremiah," Agnes said. She wiped the raindrops from her face with a small handkerchief. Her cheeks were delicately tinged with red, but her lips were pale and her voice feeble. She seemed very tired.

"God bless you both," Jeremiah said quietly.

"Where are you going?" Johnny asked. He bent down and lifted the horse's leg to examine the shoe.

"I don't know yet," Jeremiah answered.

Johnny laughed. He was squatting on his heels with the horse's hock on his knee.

"He doesn't know yet," he said, without looking up. "Did you hear that, Agnes? He doesn't know yet."

He bent farther forward to examine the hoof more closely.

"Well, what did I tell you, Agnes?" he said loudly. "The shoes don't fit right. And we have only five nails left out of the eight. Well, who was right, me or the blacksmith?" He lowered the horse's leg to the ground. "So you don't know where you're going," he said, bending to examine the other hoof.

"I will know soon," Jeremiah said.

"How will you know?" Agnes asked softly.

"He will tell me. Perhaps at night, perhaps at noon, perhaps just at dusk. He will speak to me and I'll hear, just as you hear me speaking now. Then I'll know."

"Will He speak English?" Johnny asked coldly.

"No," Jeremiah said. "He needs no words."

Johnny shrugged and laughed softly. He walked around the horse.

"Come on," he said, patting the horse to make it lift its leg. "Come on now." Again he squatted on his heels and examined the hoof.

"So He speaks without words," he mused. "How interesting. Do you hear that, Agnes? There's somebody can talk without words."

He shook his head and got up again.

"Yes," Agnes said, "He can speak without words." She drew the tarpaulin tighter around her shoulders. Her hands were red and wet and her fingers stiff. The heavy canvas kept slipping back.

"Are you cold?" Johnny asked.

"A little," she said. "I wish we had a fire."

"We want to move on. We have a hell of a long way to go. I don't think we ought to lose any time. On account of the herd. They say we'll have to travel hard if we want to get there in time." He looked around. "Anyway, everything's soaked; we'd never get a fire started." He bent down and picked up a charred stick. "Sopping wet," he said. "Would take hours for stuff like this to burn. Wouldn't it, preacher?"

"I think we'd have to split it for it to burn at all," Jeremiah said.

All fell silent. The rustle of the rain had become very low, but they could hear the near-by brook and the scraping of the horses' hoofs as they shifted their weight.

Johnny tossed the stick away. It thudded on the wet earth and did not slide at all.

"We're riding on," he said suddenly. He took the reins of Agnes's horse. "You must be sensible. It'll stop raining soon, anyway. Then the sun'll come out and dry up everything, and at night we can make a nice fire and have coffee. And soon we'll come to our herd and then some day we'll go back to Cheyenne."

The horse raised his head and took a step.

"Johnny," Agnes whispered.

"What?" He took the reins of the pack horse.

"Don't you want to ask Mr. Kentrup whether he'll ride part of the way with us?"

"Oh," Johnny said. He looked at Jeremiah. "Well, what about it, preacher?" he asked gruffly. "Will you ride in our unholy company?"

"I think I'll be a burden to you," Jeremiah said. "My horse is old." He turned to look at the animal, still standing in the same place. Its head was stretched forward and its nose almost touched the ground. Its grey hair fell over its eyes and the blanket on its back had slipped sideways. Johnny followed his gaze. "Oh, well," he said, "we could try. I'm afraid you won't get very far on that nag, though. It's not worth more than its hide. Somebody cheated you, Jeremiah."

"They gave him to me for almost nothing," Jeremiah replied. "And I like him, though I haven't had him long. He isn't bad at all, just old. Very old, I think."

"I didn't mean anything, preacher," Johnny said placatingly. "Maybe I'm wrong. Lots of animals are stouter than they look." He looked at the horse again. "You ought to watch out that it doesn't eat any wet grass. They say it can kill a horse to eat wet grass." He paused. "Well, what about it?"

Jeremiah looked at Agnes. She seemed shrivelled and the lines around her mouth had become deeper. Her eyes were half closed and a strand of hair hung over her forehead. She seemed delicate and frail and in need of help.

"Do come, Jeremiah," she whispered, "three are better than two or one on a journey." She paused. "Johnny and I wish you would come. We'd like it very much."

Johnny cleared his throat. "Well, what about it?" he asked again.

"I'll get the horse," Jeremiah said. "And I ought to eat something before we start. Just a little."

He went over to the stump and loosened the line by which he had tied the horse. The rain had stopped. A wind came up from the valley and

commenced to dry out the land. It began with the rocks, rubbing the gleam of moisture off projections and outcroppings, though leaving the water still standing in all the depressions. It brushed over the tallest grass stems, and when these were dry and raised their heads, it turned to the next, and so on, deeper and deeper into the grass, until it touched and dried the smallest weeds and then the earth itself.

The horse raised its head when Jeremiah took the blanket from its back and folded it into a saddle. "Come," Jeremiah said to it, and took the reins. It followed slowly along behind him until they reached Johnny's horses.

Johnny looked at it askance. A miserable creature, with a sagging back and swollen belly. It breathed heavily, and there was something wrong with its eyes. What an animal to travel on.

"It isn't so bad from close up," Agnes said. "It has good strong legs and a smooth skin. Isn't that so, Johnny, it isn't so bad?"

"No," Johnny said, "it just looked bad when it was standing in the rain under the blanket. Any horse looks bad then, any horse."

Jeremiah smiled. "I think he's really not bad for an old horse," he said. He went to his sack of provisions.

The bread lay on a stone in the centre of a small puddle. It was like a wet sponge. Jeremiah picked it up, and water dripped from the crust and ran over his fingers. He tried breaking off a piece, but it had become tough. Finally he succeeded in tearing off a corner. He felt little crumbs of the soggy mass get under his fingernails. The bread was cold and repulsive; it had an insipid taste and rain water squeezed out when he chewed it. He turned his back to the others while he ate. He was very hungry, but gradually the bread filled his stomach. He felt warmer. As he ate, the colours of the little valley grew brighter. Besides the hazel-nut bushes, fern and reed grass grew here, and farther up there was a small meadow . . .

"Hey, Jeremiah!" Johnny called.

"In a minute," Jeremiah answered.

"What are you doing?"

"Eating."

"How about giving me a little?"

Jeremiah turned to face him. With a chunk of the soaked bread in his hand, he went up to Johnny.

"You won't want it," he said.

Johnny looked at it, and when he saw what it was, he forgot his hunger.

"I have some other things here," Jeremiah said.

"No, thanks."

"What about you, Mrs. Brown?"

"I wouldn't mind a little piece of the bread," Agnes said. She bent

down to Jeremiah, holding out her cupped hand. Without looking at her, Jeremiah placed a piece of the mushy stuff in her hand.

"Ugh," Johnny said.

"It isn't so bad," Agnes said. "As children we often used to eat it. It's rather nice, has the taste of flour and the oven. Old people who haven't any teeth can eat it without chewing. It's not bad when you're hungry."

She ate the bread slowly, looking now at Jeremiah, now at Johnny, and then out over the valley. She looked, too, at her own red hands and the high boots she wore, at her woollen blouse and the canvas over her and she wondered.

Together they forded the little stream and began ascending the other side of the valley. The old horse went slowly and heavily, and sometimes it stood still and waited for Jeremiah to dismount. Then it walked on and Jeremiah walked at its side.

When they reached the top of the hill, they saw that in the distance the clouds had cleared. Soon the sun would help the wind dry the earth.

After the rain, the air pressure over the north central states mounted once more. It extended from Kansas west to Colorado and up as far as Wyoming and Idaho.

The air was clear and transparent. At noon it shimmered over stones and bare spots in the ground. But it hovered invisibly over potato patches and wheatfields, and one knew it was there only because it was laden with the smell of the growing plants.

It hung over the cities too, but there it was dirty and smoke-filled, burdened with millions of dust motes. They rose high like gossamer veils and hung motionless and invisible for weeks in the warm atmosphere.

The moisture in the air also was invisible. It came from the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers, from Lake Michigan and Salt Lake, from the Atlantic and the Pacific, and from the leaves of peas, tomatoes and beans, as well as from the trees. On a warm day a single birch poured from its two hundred thousand leaves over eight hundred gallons of invisible water vapour into the air.

One day all this moisture would form into small drops. It would cling to the dust motes, and the farmers would see clouds in the sky, and they would curse or smile, depending on whether they already had their hay in the lofts.

But now they sat by the roadside with dusty shoes and hot feet and ate their bread and drank the water the children fetched from the brook. They looked up at the sky, and it was clear. There was nothing in the air but a few flies and bees and gnats. They chewed with their mouths open and spoke of the fine stand of wheat and corn, and that there were few weeds because of the dryness. They could almost reckon this year's

harvest and what they would get for it if prices didn't drop suddenly. They squinted at the horizon. No doubt about it, there'd be no change before the harvest. The air was clear and dry and not oppressive; the flies were bearable and the swallows flew high; there were no mole heaps—no signs at all that there was anything in the air.

They knew nothing of the young spiders that hung by their own silk fifteen thousand feet above sea level, nor of the dragonflies which preferred a height of seven thousand feet, nor of the termites, which found three thousand feet the ideal height. They had no suspicion of the flower thrips that would ruin their cotton plantings, floating as high as ten thousand feet, or that the lacewing flies were drifting in the wind at an altitude of three thousand feet.

Year after year an average of twenty-five million insects were around them, not counting the locust swarms that at this moment were flying overhead, while they sat and ate their bread and spoke of the coming harvest, the new barn, the repairs to the roof; while they spoke of a future that seemed as sunny as this summer day.

Twenty-five millions of insects, not counting the locusts.

The Trail ran like a broad band over the plain. During wet weather the animals had left footprints in the ground, and the sun had dried these prints hard. The next rain had washed them partly away, but once more a herd had passed. The sun and rain again, and more cows and calves and steers. They pastured all the way from Texas to Denver and Cheyenne—bought animals, stolen animals, animals won at poker. There were herds the cowboys had driven together themselves and burned with their own brand. And there were the herds that belonged to the cattle kings, whose brands were known all the way from the Rockies to Chicago. The cattle grazed and drank and chewed their cuds, and their droppings plumped to the ground; they slept and died, begat and bore progeny—and when they had passed and the dust had settled, the Trail remained, stretching on as far as the eye could see.

Agnes usually rode between the two men. She was pale, although the sun shone hotly, and she tired quickly. Often she sagged in her saddle and seemed to sleep. After awhile she would start up, and then straighten her back and look around with a smile. But soon her head sank down between her shoulders again and her body sagged forward.

Jeremiah spoke little. He sat on the old horse and gazed at the ground, which seemed to flow slowly away beneath him. When the horse tired, he dismounted and led it, and when the wind was in their faces he thrust one shoulder forward, as though mounting the hill in Bear Lake County.

Johnny was unchanged and untouched by the travelling. Sharp-eyed, he scanned the endless expanse of land and rode whistling through the quiet valleys. Sometimes he glanced at his wife secretly, and when he saw

her eyes close, he said, "Agnes, wake up." The hasty straightening up often made her cough. Johnny would stop his horse and wait until she had wiped her eyes with her little handkerchief and was smiling again.

When they had to cross small streams, Johnny dismounted and examined the sand. He let it run through his fingers and inspected the residue. Then he would shake his head. "Not a single grain in twenty-three rivers. And yet they all look as though they're full of gold. A few ounces wouldn't do us any harm." Then he led his horse through the stream. Agnes smiled at him and he patted her on the shoulder and said, "Keep your chin up, old girl, we'll be there soon."

Every day was hotter and there was less water in the rivers. Sometimes there were only scattered puddles, lukewarm and full of dead gnats and flies. Then they had to pour the water through a sieve before they drank it.

Every morning and evening Johnny boiled coffee. He always made enough so that they could fill their flasks. Sometimes he took out a bread pan and baked corn bread; other times he made a soup out of chunks of meat and lard and flour. When Agnes remarked that she would have to learn all these things, he laughed and shook his head.

"You'll have a cook to do it for you, Agnes," he said. "You'll just tell her what you like. And you can go riding all day long. In a coach-and-four, if you like."

"Will you visit us then, Jeremiah?" Agnes asked.

"I don't think so," Jeremiah replied.

"Why not?" Johnny asked.

"Because I'll be far away from where you are."

They fell silent.

"Where will you be?" Agnes asked after awhile.

Jeremiah did not answer at once. He had placed Johnny's shoe on a stone and was hammering nails into the heel. He held the shoe with the back of his left hand, keeping the nail steady between his thumb and forefinger. In his right hand he held the hammer. His initial blow was easy and careful, but as soon as the nail was stuck fast in the leather, he struck hard.

"You see," he said, "that isn't so easy to answer." With the hammer he held the shoe firmly while his left hand groped in his pocket for another nail. He placed it against the shoe, but did not begin hammering again. He looked at Agnes.

"Can you understand that I know where I will be and yet don't know?"

"No," she replied, her voice hard and unmoved. Then she raised her eyebrows and wrinkled her brow, and her lips grew thin. She repeated, "No, Jeremiah."

"No," Johnny said. He laughed and threw a stick of wood on the fire.

Then he placed his hands on his hips and shook his head. "Honest to God, no."

"You can save your hocus-pocus when you're with us," Agnes went on. "You don't have to wear your halo now." She picked up a stone that lay beside her. "This is a stone," she said. She threw the stone away and picked up a piece of wood. "And this is a piece of wood, and no is no and yes is yes." She coughed and leaned back. With the back of her fingers she rubbed her forehead. Johnny looked at her and placed his hand on her knee. Jeremiah sat motionless, still holding the nail against the heel.

"You oughtn't to excite yourself," he said softly.

He started to say something else, then closed his mouth and smiled. He bent his head and began again with his hammering.

When the moon rose the air grew cool and Johnny went to fetch a blanket.

Agnes lay flat on the ground. She had folded her arms under her head and her eyes were almost closed.

"Why have you said nothing about my wanting to go with you, Jeremiah?" she asked.

Jeremiah put a fat log on the fire. He propped it against a stone so as not to smother the small flames. When the fibres on the edge began to glow, he straightened.

"With me?" he asked.

"You can't have forgotten, Jeremiah?"

Jeremiah said nothing. The wood he had placed on the fire began to crackle. Drops of sap appeared like beads of sweat on the cut surface and evaporated. The smoke turned blue and biting, and the wind trailed it over the plain.

"You wanted to go my way," Jeremiah said finally. "That was it, wasn't it? My way." He looked at her and saw again how pale and slender she was, frail and perhaps sick. And then he was afraid she would cry.

"That was it, sister, wasn't it?" he asked again.

"Perhaps," she whispered, and turned her head away.

Next morning, as the two men went down to the brook to wash, Johnny took Jeremiah by the arm.

"You mustn't think anything of it if Agnes acts a little funny," he said. "She don't mean anything by it. Sits all day long on that horse with the sun on her head. She's not used to it. Even if she was stronger, all this change would affect her."

Jeremiah stood still. "I think you ought to stay awhile in Denver with her," he said.

"What for?"

"She might need to rest up. Maybe all this travelling is too much for her."

Johnny walked on. He held his head down and there was a deep fold over his nose.

"I must get to Texas," he said finally. "You know I must get to Texas. I haven't any time to lose. Prices can go up every day, and just a cent a pound amounts to a fortune on a few thousand head. No, preacher, it's no go; we've got to keep moving."

They reached the brook and took off their shirts. There was not much water, but in the shadow of an overhanging bank there was enough for washing.

"Look here, Jeremiah," Johnny said, "do you think there's anything serious the matter with Agnes? I don't know about such things, but when she rides along so pale and thin I get frightened sometimes and think she's really sick. And then she coughs, and when I ask her what's the matter she says, 'Oh, nothing' or 'I'm all right now.'"

"I don't know," Jeremiah replied, "but I think you ought to have her examined in Denver."

"Merde!" Johnny said. "By a doctor, you mean?"

Jeremiah nodded.

"But I must get to Texas. Mainly on her account I have to get to Texas. After all, I want to make the money for her. I've promised her a cook and a coach-and-four and silk dresses. She's going to be a real lady. Understand? People are goin' to bow to her. And if I'm not too tired in the evenings, she can teach me things. Sure, she can teach me school. She must know a lot of things I never even dreamed of. After all, she's been a schoolteacher. I don't think there are many women who've been schoolteachers." He looked sidewise at Jeremiah. "Why don't you say anything?"

Jeremiah seemed to awaken from a dream. He smiled and brushed his hand over his forehead. He was naked to the waist, and the water gleamed on his shoulders and his neck.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "What were you saying?"

He sat down on a stone and dangled his feet in the pool. He rested his chin in his hands. His face was turned upward and his red beard was like fire in the sun.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" Johnny asked.

"Would you believe that He has just spoken to me, a few seconds ago?"

Johnny placed his hands on his hips and shook his head. "Well, what did He say?"

"At first His voice was low and unclear," Jeremiah explained, "and I still heard what you were saying to me. But then it became loud and distinct. 'Another message will await you, Jeremiah,' He said to me.

'One will come who will have bloody feet, and the dust will hang in his hair, and they will stand around him with open mouths and bated breath. They will shudder at his tale, and weep and moan. You will ask this messenger the way and he will tell you where is the land the locusts have visited. Then you will wait not a single hour, Jeremiah, nor will you tarry on the way, nor rest at the springs, until you come to those who are in need of you.' "

Johnny stood stock-still, with mouth open. He passed the sole of his foot over the water, stirring little ripples that ran into the sandy bank.

"He really said all that to you, Jeremiah?" he said.

"Yes," Jeremiah replied. "He said that to me and it still sounds in my ears as though it will never fade; it is a thousand times sharper than the sounds that are heard one moment and gone the next. It is as clear as a picture, as tangible almost as the water or the land or you as you stand here before me. It's like the time He showed me Bear Lake County. Just like that." He spoke slowly and quietly, with smiling face. His head was withdrawn into his neck and his arms hung slack at his sides.

"I see the man," he went on, "his wrinkled face and the stubble of his whiskers, his tattered clothes and sweat-soaked shirt and torn shoes. And I see the people of the city, standing around him and gaping and questioning and shaking their heads. And I see the way he came. I see the campfires where he slept and the rivers he drank from, and I see the weariness in his eyes and his hopelessness and despair." Jeremiah paused and took a deep breath. His words had sunk to a whisper; he seemed to be talking only to himself.

"I hear the children crying in their beds," he said, "and the cattle bellowing in the barns. I see the hearth fires going out and young trees collapsing. I smell the infested air, stinking of the yellow and brown juices from their mouths and the pulp of their crushed bodies. I feel despair growing out of the naked soil, and unbelief and rage and hatred. And then night falls . . ." He fell silent and his mouth remained slightly open. After a while he repeated, "Yes, then night falls, Johnny."

A cool wind came up and the men shivered. They drew on their shirts and waded out of the water on to the warm sand.

When Johnny looked up after donning his shoes, everything was the same as it had been. The sun shone and the ground was hard, the grass grew in clusters and rustled fragrantly as far as eye could see.

"You c'n give a man a chill with those stories of yours," he said, tearing a handful of grama grass from the ground. "It gets on a guy's nerves," he added, rubbing the grass between his palms.

He turned to face Jeremiah, his eyes narrowing and his lips compressed, his jaw thrust slightly forward.

"I think it's a mistake to let someone like you run around loose," he

said. "Your kind belongs behind bars. You ought to have your mouth shut once for all—and if you happen to have the idea you're going to make Agnes crazy with your stories, I'll break every bone in your body. Get that, preacher. I'll break every bone in your body."

He turned and began ascending the hill. Jeremiah followed slowly. When they reached the top, they stood still. They saw Agnes in her bright dress, and the thin smoke from the fire, and farther back, tied to a stunted tree, the horses. In the distance were the mountains and above them a cloudless sky. Everything was laved in a gentle light, at once delicately lovely and imposing.

Agnes saw the men descending toward her. She wiped the perspiration from her forehead and sat up. There were spots before her eyes; she felt that she was being swung back and forth in a hammock. She glanced at a big rock that lay near the fire. No, they would never notice that she had lifted it and tucked a handkerchief under it. It was a good thing the two had been away when the attack came. They would have been so frightened by the blood. Suddenly it had been there in her mouth. It must have happened often before, but she had never seen it until now. She had only tasted it and swallowed it. She had always been frightened. Sometimes she had quivered with fear. But always, after a few minutes, when she put the handkerchief to her mouth, unobserved, there had been nothing, and that had always reassured her. Maybe the heat and the dry air had made a little vein burst in her throat, she thought. That must be it, of course. After all, she couldn't be seriously ill and yet sit on a horse all day long and sleep out in the open at night, swallowing dust, alternately drenched by rain and dried by the wind and sun—if she was seriously ill she couldn't do all that and feel nothing but a little tiredness and the need to cough now and then.

But now she knew. No doubt about it now. There's nothing you can do, Agnes, she said to herself. You've got the disease Mother died of and maybe Father. Her father had failed to come home one day. They had buried him on the way, they said. He had died at night. They hadn't known the cause—there'd been no doctor. All they'd known was that he was dead; they'd been sure of that.

Lucky for her the men were travelling slowly. How far was it to Denver? She must see a doctor. There must be a doctor in Denver who would know what to do. And she must ride to one side of the men, and hang back when it came again. She would just have to say she wanted to be alone for a moment. And then go behind a bush. It would be over quickly. How long had it lasted this time? Not even five minutes. Then a minute or two to get her strength back. No more.

The wind was wonderful. It dried the perspiration better than her handkerchief, which was already soaked. Why weren't the men talking?

She ought to smile. And why shouldn't she smile? Was she feeling bad, or weak, or sick? Maybe she wasn't sick at all. Of course, you'd feel differently if you really had the disease. Just an upset stomach. And now the bad blood was out of her and she'd be healthy again. She was healthy, of course. Nature had provided her own cure. Thank God, nature knew what to do.

"Well, you men," she said when Jeremiah and Johnny came up to her, "I thought you were never coming back. I was so pleased. At last I'm rid of you, I thought, and I have five horses and all the baggage—I can ride to Denver and look for something else to do." She looked up at them. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Johnny said.

"You oughtn't to quarrel. People ought never to quarrel. There's nothing so important that it's worth quarrelling over. All that matters is that one is alive. And that one is healthy. So marvellously healthy." She stood up. The ground was firm under her feet and her eyes saw clearly. "Come, shake hands," she said. "Come on, you stupid men, shake hands right away."

The two looked at each other and laughed.

"I guess she's right, preacher," Johnny said. "Of course she's right," Jeremiah assented.

"A thousand times righter than we are."

They shook hands and Johnny kissed his wife. Then they rode on. Agnes sat upright in the saddle and rode in her old position between the men. Now and then she looked back at their camp, and for a long time she saw a certain white stone gleaming in the sunlight.

When the trail turned, they came into another valley. It was hot and dusty and seemed endless. The horses stepped cautiously because the stones underfoot were loose. The men dismounted. They walked beside Agnes, to right and left. They took long strides. The sweat glistened on their faces. Their mouths were open a little for easier breathing. Of course, they were right, it was easier to breathe with your mouth open. And easier to sit when you bent your back. And why shouldn't she close her eyes when the darkness was so much better than the terrible flickering and gleaming of the stones?

"Go on, you two," Agnes said softly, in a strangely tense voice. "I'll be right along." Carefully, she guided her horse to the stunted pines that grew along the bank of a dried-out brook.

How much farther was it to Denver?

When they neared the city, they met other travellers whose destination was the same. They came from the outlying valleys and were going to market in Denver. They rode on ponies or in wagons drawn by horses or oxen. They had baskets and sacks loaded on their swaying wagons,

and long after the sound of the creaking wheels had died away the dust hung in the air behind them.

When they rode past Johnny and his companions, they called out friendly greetings. They had grave faces, which were criss-crossed by tiny wrinkles when they laughed.

"Hot to-day," they said, looking up at the sky.

"Very hot," Johnny agreed.

"Going to Denver, too?"

"No, Texas."

They shook their heads. "You have to stop off in Denver," they said. "Have you ever been in Denver?"

When Johnny said no, they smiled. "You'll see," they assured him. "You'll like it. A marvellous city. No, no, nothing like the rest. Altogether different. No, we won't say anything, but we wouldn't be surprised if you stayed a couple of weeks. And the lady will love it, you'll see."

Then they rode on and others came after them. No one stopped to talk more than a few minutes. They were in a hurry. Here was the plain and the heat and the dust, and behind them were their farms and the drought and the weeds in their fields, chickenpox and the hoof-and-mouth disease. But before them lay Denver.

Denver—that was something to look forward to. Of course it wasn't what it used to be in the good old days, when it was called Auroria. After all, it really couldn't go along without changing. You had to have some kind of order, and things like what had happened in the Great Corral really had to be stopped. Or that matter of the undertaker whose business was to bury all the men who were shot or died violent deaths in some other way. After all, it wasn't right for the swindler to use the same coffin for every corpse, just turning it over in the cemetery and dumping the body into the grave, instead of giving each man a clean and decent burial. It was good things like that had changed.

But, of course, Denver had never been a city of God. Not by a long shot. At least twenty-five places where you could gamble your money away. Not to mention the Palace Theatre, where you were served by delectable girls. But even here was a certain amount of order nowadays. It didn't open till nine at night and it closed at four in the morning, sharp. At closing time they just threw you out on the street. Everyone, hunters and trappers, men from the plains with wide belts and shiny revolvers, teamsters in leather suits, horse traders in fur coats and boots of buffalo hide, Broadway dandies with yellow kid gloves. Out they went. And if it was Sunday morning, before you rode home you could drop in at St. John's Cathedral and hear Mass.

The sun stood almost directly overhead when the three rode into the city. Agnes was pale and constantly held her handkerchief pressed against her mouth. "It's just the dust," she said when Johnny questioned her.

The two men did not look at each other, and talked little. The streets of the city were deserted; people stayed at home at this time of day. Their horses were tired. Their hoofs kicked up little dust; they were on a road composed of a mixture of sand and clay which frequent wettings and dryings had hardened into a natural pavement.

They stopped at a hotel. Yes, rooms were available if they had their own beds or were willing to sleep on the floor. Three dollars a day including board. Per person, of course. No, they had nothing better in Denver. They'd have to take what they could get. And please be quiet so as not to disturb our other guests. The walls are just canvas and you can hear every word. Horses were extra. Nothing to do about it. Feed is expensive and there's little stable room. Suit yourselves. . . . And probably you won't be alone in the room. We're terribly overcrowded; sorry, but you have to consider others.

Jeremiah helped Johnny unpack and set up beds. Then he said good-bye.

"No, I can't stay," he said to Agnes. "I have very little money and a long way to go."

"Won't you invite him, Johnny?" she asked when Jeremiah had left the room.

"No," Johnny said, "I want to be alone with you for once."

"I'll miss him very much," she whispered. "There's something about him. You feel that nothing much can happen to you when he's around. You're not afraid of anything."

They fell silent. The room had a tiny window and was dark in spite of the full sunlight. The air was stale. It smelled of cooking. They could clearly hear every word from the "lobby."

"Yes, that's how I feel," she said after a while.

Johnny sat up. "About what?" he asked.

Agnes lay back. Her eyes were closed and she did not open them, though she recognized the ugly tone in Johnny's voice.

"About Jeremiah," she said softly.

"I suppose you're afraid when you're with me?" Johnny asked, bending over her. "I'm not strong enough for you, am I? I can't make all that hocus-pocus like the preacher. I haven't got a soft voice and a face like Christ, have I?"

Agnes did not answer. Her forehead was damp. Her mouth was slightly open and in the dim light she seemed about to smile.

"Don't laugh at me, Agnes," Johnny went on. His face hardened. "I . . . I'm just somebody who happened to make money. A dumb bloke who don't matter. A blind man who don't see what's going on around him. Who ought to say 'thank you' when a schoolteacher marries him. I c'n pay for things. Three dollars for the room and extra for the horses . . ." He took her wrist between his fingers and began to press it. Tears came to Agnes's eyes, but she made no sound.

Slowly he released her and lay back on his mattress. "I'll break every bone in his body if I lay hands on him again," he said.

"You won't touch him."

"I'll half kill him."

"You won't put a finger on him."

"And who's going to stop me? Maybe God Himself?"

"Maybe," Agnes said, and turned over on her side to sleep.

"700 MILES TO THE NEAREST CHURCH" read the sign over the gate of St. John's Cathedral on the corner of 14th and Arapahoe Streets.

Jeremiah entered. It was dimly lit, cool and quiet, and almost deserted. The wooden figures carved by Joseph Mair of Oberammergau gazed empty-eyed from the niches; the stained-glass windows painted pews and floor with their colours.

Jeremiah sat down on a bench. He closed his eyes and propped his head in his hands. The heat of the day still oppressed him; he felt that his face was damp. He saw the sun as it flickered on the bright walls of buildings, then dissolved gradually into single points and spots. Finally, darkness closed in beneath his shut lids. He heard a fly buzzing around his head. It settled on his forehead and began to crawl toward his nose. Sometimes it was motionless for a moment, and Jeremiah knew it was rubbing its forelegs together. He need only wrinkle his brow to chase it away. But he did nothing. He wanted to be perfectly still and enjoy his immobility, luxuriate in the slackness of his muscles, and absorb the darkness within himself until he was saturated with it. Full to the brim . . .

There was a gentle, lovely atmosphere all about him. Now Henrietta sat beside him, her baby in her lap. "Yes, life has become very peaceful here," she said. "The sun shines and the wind sighs over the hill. We've made second plantings in some places. If God wills, it will stay warm long enough for us to have a harvest, after all. All we need is a little more rain."

In the valley the vegetables were thriving, and the women still crouched there under their big straw hats. They spoke little. Sometimes they glanced at the sluice and murmured, "Wonder where Jeremiah is?" Yes, it was a blessed land. Not that they had no worries now. But they knew that the Lord was with them.

The dream wove its web ever closer around Jeremiah; the delicate hues from the windows moved slowly over the benches. An old woman and a child who had been praying tiptoed past the sleeping man with the red beard. The candles flickered as they opened the doors; then the church was still again and even the fly sat motionless on Jeremiah's forehead.

Imperceptibly, the shadow of St. John's Cathedral began to creep

over the street. It was still hot, but the suggestion of the evening breeze that would transform the world was already in the air.

"God be with you," Father Grégoire said to those he met. He had a thin face and thin lips, and his skin was parched. His eyes held a deep-seated mockery, but he seldom smiled. He had come here with Bishop Marchembeuf; in a few months the two of them had done more good than could a hundred priests in their whole lives in France. But now he administered St. John's Cathedral, read his books and occasionally rode out into the country. The farmers knew him well and were pleased when he came. Not so much because he offered them spiritual consolation, as because he was an accomplished veterinarian. When a cow was sick, they led him directly to the barn, rather than to the parlour.

"God be with you," he said when he stopped in a small store for provisions, while making his rounds. He shook his head over the prices. Everything was too dear, far too dear. Five dollars for a hundred pounds of flour and fifteen cents a pound for bacon. Yes, he said, he knew the man in the store earned little, and that the farmers were complaining too. "Heaven knows who makes the profit," he said softly. No one knew precisely what he meant.

When he entered his church and found Jeremiah sleeping, he tried to step as softly as possible. But his shoe leather creaked and Jeremiah awoke. He did not start; he merely opened his eyes, so that at first Father Grégoire did not notice that the red-bearded man was awake. When he reached the altar, he felt Jeremiah's gaze, and turned.

"Praise be to Jesus Christ," he said, approaching Jeremiah.

"God bless you, brother," Jeremiah replied, standing up.

"Won't you stay?" the priest asked.

"It's very lovely here," Jeremiah said, his hand stroking the fissured wood of the praying stool. "It's a good place when one needs strength." He looked up, his head tilted sidewise. "Thank you for letting me sleep." He paused, and for a moment it was so quiet that each man could hear the other's breathing.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay?"

"No, I must leave," Jeremiah whispered, so softly that Father Grégoire barely understood him. "I must leave soon, very soon."

"For the West?"

"I don't think so."

"I beg your pardon, I didn't intend to be curious." The priest paused. "Can I help you in any way?" he asked.

Jeremiah seemed not to be listening. Above his nose, between his eyes, was a deep, straight fold of skin. His mouth was open slightly as though he intended to speak. Was it the lights that had suddenly made it so warm in the church? And everything was so quiet. And soft. As though cloaked in velvet. The candles wore a halo. And the stained-glass

window looked like a great, blue-veined cloud. "Can I help you?" the priest asked again.

Jeremiah heard the words from far away. They were toneless. Spoken by someone who had no voice. They were small words, weak and poor, drowned out by the great roaring that was in Jeremiah's ears. The sound he heard was like a melody, but sweeter, deeper and more confusing. It did not come from without, it lay within himself, pressing upon his heart so that he could scarcely breathe. It was confusing and intoxicating, infinitely gentle and melancholy. It made him so happy that tears started in his eyes.

"Are you hungry?" Father Grégoire asked when he saw that Jeremiah was swaying. "Are you sick, brother?"

Jeremiah did not hear. His head was bowed and his eyes closed. The shadow of a pillar concealed his face. His arms were slack and the palms of his hands turned outward. His tall, grey, rumpled figure was almost invisible in the gloom of the church; his feet in the rude, dust-covered boots were like an upheaving of the floor itself. His hair was agleam with the last light.

He started when Father Grégoire placed his hand on his arm.

"What do you want, brother?" he asked softly. The inward roaring diminished; the hazy outlines of the church hardened and the blue-veined cloud became once more the ardent colours of the window.

"You were so strange," Father Grégoire said. "I thought something was wrong with you."

Jeremiah smiled and shook his head. "No, it's nothing," he said. He brushed his hand over his forehead and stood erect. "It must be late afternoon," he said. "It is late, isn't it?"

"It's almost four o'clock," the priest said. He gazed steadily at Jeremiah. "I've seen you once before somewhere," he went on. "It must be a pleasant memory. And from very long ago. So long ago that I can no longer recall. The memory grows less clear now. Curious that I cannot remember. Who are you?"

"My name is Jeremiah Kentrup."

"I am Father Grégoire. Formerly I was called Louis Préjean." He fell silent. He looked at Jeremiah, seeking words. "Are you sure I cannot help you?" he asked finally.

"Quite sure," Jeremiah replied. He held out his hand. "I think I must go now." He gazed across the dim room toward the door, which was now ajar. A band of sunlight pierced the gloom and illuminated the dust motes that hung in the air. "I will never forget you, Father Grégoire," he said. "God bless you!"

"God bless you, Jeremiah Kentrup," the priest said.

Jeremiah went directly to the stable where he had left the horse. The

animal had lain down on the bedding, propping its heavy back against the side wall, which was a little crooked from all the weary horses that had leaned their backs against the boards. I must have the hoofs examined before I go on, Jeremiah thought. And I should have given the poor beast good oats for a few days. But that would not be possible. He must be very near, for whom Jeremiah waited. Perhaps He was already in the city. God had not spoken in the church, but He had been there, around Jeremiah. He had felt Him so distinctly. He could have touched Him if he had stretched out his hand. How good to know certainly that this was the city where he would meet the messenger.

He went out to the street. People were emerging from their houses. The mountains in the distance had become more distinct. It was getting cooler. Men drove past in elegant little carriages. Beside them sat pretty women with smiling faces. They wore large hats with veils, and when they met they inclined their heads or waved demurely. Now and again a large sprinkler wagon appeared, moistening the street. Jeremiah heard the shrill peal of the signal bell from the train that left Denver for Kansas at 5.03.

The people on the sidewalks gazed with curiosity at those who rode in the carriages. They interrupted their talks to remark on them: "How charming she looks, Mrs. Mortimer," they said, or, "If I were Mrs. Jones's husband, I'd keep my eyes open," or, "Sure, it's easy enough to have fine horses when you've stolen all the money that fellow Waller has." Then they resumed their own conversations. Wasn't worth washing gold in Cherry Creek or in the Platte any more, even if they did flow right through the city and you could go down to the bank and start work whenever you had nothing better to do. For everyone had something better to do. Buildings were going up everywhere and even a carpenter's assistant could earn two dollars a day loafing; washing gold was hard work and you never netted more than a dollar-eighty. They talked about harvests and antelope hunts, about coyotes that had broken into the henyards, about rents, which were rising all the time—in some places they were already thirty dollars a month. Wherever people gathered, the conversations were the same, on 14th Street and on Welton Street, on Larimer Street and on Ferry Street, and even on "Hop Alley," between 18th and 20th Streets, where the Chinese railroad workers lived—even here they talked with grave and immobile faces and in low voices about the same daily commonplaces.

As he strolled aimlessly through the streets of the city, Jeremiah heard fragments of the talk. A quite commonplace twilight lay upon the houses and life moved gently in its old, well-worn courses. Nothing, nothing was in the air. For if there had been, people would not stand at their doors chatting and quietly smoking their pipes or look sleepily out the windows, nor would the women go shopping with big baskets on their

arms. Many were reading newspapers, but these too slouched peacefully. One read of too many accidents and disasters nowadays. Kansas—my God, Kansas was hundreds of miles away. Drought and locusts and famine—too bad, too bad, but everyone had to look out for himself and you couldn't do more than shake your head. And when finally they read that coyotes had killed forty of George Kelly's hens a few nights ago, they forgot Kansas. Kelly, well, he was a good fellow and having a hard time of it as it was, what with his sick wife—lived just above the city, didn't he, near the South Platte River.

As it grew darker, Jeremiah became more and more certain that the messenger he awaited was in the city. He had not yet found him, that was all. But he must be there. Perhaps he was around the next corner, or over on the next street in front of the mint, or over there where that crowd was gathered. Jeremiah should have gone to see Agnes and Johnny long ago, but he didn't dare to enter a building. He must not be out of sight for a moment.

Only a faint reflection of daylight remained in the sky when he passed the cathedral again. Few of the handsome sulkies were abroad now; most of the citizens of Denver were at their suppers. The farmers from the neighbourhood had left the city again and the girls in the Palace Theatre were making up for the evening. They combed their hair and powdered their faces, yawned and ate sugar-coated almonds from big round boxes that someone had given them the night before.

A wagon lumbered down the street. Jeremiah heard it from a distance; the wheels groaned as though they had a long and hard road behind them. The animals drawing it walked slowly and unwillingly. As they came nearer Jeremiah saw that they were oxen, driven by a child, and that a man was sitting on the box.

Jeremiah could not make out the man's features. But then the oxen stopped and he heard him calling.

"Oha," the man said, and the oxen stopped instantly. He laid his stick down and leaned far forward.

"Hey, you!" he called. His voice was hoarse and weary.

"What?" Jeremiah asked.

"C'n you come over here a minute? If it's no trouble. It's hard for me to move, you see. Very hard."

Jeremiah went to the wagon. He was calm and grave, his heart beat no faster, he stepped firmly, and he smiled.

"Can I help you, brother?" he asked.

"My name is Hieronymus Wollenweber. Excuse me for not getting down. I'm sick, you see. I mean my feet are sick. You can't see how sick they are. I think I walked too far, a lot too far." He groaned softly. "The beasts wouldn't have moved another step if I hadn't got off. Never could have got them up the mountain. But when I lead them,

they do it, anyway, even when they can hardly budge themselves. I think they do it for love of me. But I can't get off any more." He broke off. From behind in the wagon something stirred. "Can we get out, papa?" a child's voice asked.

"I think the children have to get out for a moment," a woman said.

"Must it be right here in the middle of a city?" the man said querulously. He turned to Jeremiah. "I'm looking for a place to stay. Some place where nothing'll happen to a farmer's family. Where there's enough to eat for the cattle and the wife and kids if you work hard all year. I've been on the hunt f'r a place like that for hundreds of miles. See?"

The man shrugged. He seemed to be shivering with cold. "No harm meant," he went on. "I just can't help talkin' to you about it." He turned. "Let the kids out if they insist."

From the rear of the wagon two shadows clambered down to the street.

"Good evening, sir," they said in low voices.

"God bless you," Jeremiah said.

The man chuckled feebly. "They c'n use a blessing, poor kids," he whispered. "They don't know how bad they can use it."

The big round face of the woman appeared beside the man.

"They could stand some food in their bellies a lot better, your reverend," she said. "And the thing they need most is a father who don't ride like a crazy man through the whole country because he hears voices."

"I suppose we could have stayed where we were!" the man whispered. "Weren't the locusts all over us?" He fell silent and Jeremiah heard him breathing heavily. "My God, the locusts, the locusts," he repeated.

"Where were they, those locusts of yours, mister?" a voice asked from the darkness. Jeremiah turned and saw a crowd of men standing around them.

"Where were they?" Hieronymus Wollenweber asked. He seemed not to notice anyone besides Jeremiah. "They were everywhere. They've eaten all Kansas bare. But what's Kansas? Just a word, a name . . ." He spoke with the voice of a somnambulist. "I ought to say, they ruined Hieronymus Wollenweber and Francis Jordan and Lester Connolly. If I named names for an hour I wouldn't get through. And that isn't all. They stole the bread out of our mouths and the milk out of our jugs, they made our souls sick and our heads crazy and our hearts full of poison . . ."

"This was God's scourge," the voice of Father Grégoire interrupted from the crowd.

The woman in the wagon laughed. "It was reward because we were God-fearing folk all our lives. That's what it was." She went back into the darkness of the wagon, but returned at once. She held a bundle in

her arms. "That's why my baby has lice and a swollen belly and crooked bones."

"You should have fought," Jeremiah said. "That was your whole sin."

"Fought?" the man shouted, his voice breaking. "Can you fight the lightning?"

"Perhaps you can't fight it, but you can find shelter from it."

"You should not have doubted Him and His righteousness," Father Grégoire said.

"You should have dug drainage ditches and strewed poison and set fires," Jeremiah said. "You should have wrestled the miracle of salvation from the Lord."

"Do not hearken to him," the priest said. "God does not allow men to wrestle miracles from him. You should have prayed, prayed and believed."

All fell silent.

Then Jeremiah began to speak. His voice was soft and friendly and his words so simple and clear that all could understand him. He told them about Bear Lake County, until they felt sun and wind and saw the road and the huts. And they heard the men talking, and the rustling of the brook and the laughter of the children—and suddenly the terrible gnawing of the locusts. They felt the heat of the fire and feared for the miracle; and when it happened, they smiled wanly.

"Do you think I can find this place, this Bear Lake County?" the man asked when Jeremiah finished.

"I'll tell you the way."

He directed the man, and when he had told him all he could he stepped close to the wagon. He put his hand on the man's knee and tried to discern his features in the darkness. He must be small and bony, with a small, pointed beard. "If they ask you where you come from, tell them Brother Jeremiah sent you," he said softly. And then he asked, "What is the name of the county you come from?"

"McPherson," the man said, "and it's hell itself."

"McPherson," Jeremiah repeated. "It doesn't sound bad."

Hieronymus Wollenweber took up the stick that lay beside him on the seat.

"It isn't bad," he said hoarsely. "It's broad and hilly and the earth is the best I ever seen. You can't imagine what it's like. You just have to take a little in your hand. It's black and smells like forest soil, and yet it's so fine it runs through your fingers." He was silent. "Git on there," he growled to the oxen. And then, softly, to Jeremiah, "I think I'll try Bear Lake County."

Jeremiah stepped back. "I think you might make a start on the west slope of the hill," he said. "It's still meadowland and a small forest. If you clear the land in the fall, you can use the wood in the spring for

building. Probably you'll have to spend the first winter in your wagon. All of us did that; it isn't so bad. And you can sow right away. They'll give you seed if you haven't any. And plough the meadow under. Don't forget that, because there may still be locust eggs in the ground. In the spring you can plant it in potatoes, or beans or tomatoes."

The oxen still were not moving. They had lifted their heads for a moment, then sunk back into a half-slumber, as they had done for days whenever Hieronymus gave them a moment's rest.

"Git on," Hieronymus called again, striking at the oxen with his stick. They shrank under the blows and took half a step forward. The wagon wheels groaned, then the groaning stopped as the oxen stood still again.

"Have you a bucket?" Jeremiah asked.

"Give him the bucket, Martha," the man said, without turning.

Jeremiah took the vessel and went to a house. He knocked. "Would you mind giving me some water for the animals?" he said to the woman who opened.

"Give me the bucket," she replied. A moment later she returned with the water.

"God bless you," Jeremiah said.

"Thank you." The woman stood in the door for a moment, watching him.

While the oxen drank, Jeremiah patted their heads. He felt the dust in their hair. In many places it had caked with the sweat and become encrusted, or it hung in small lumps that he could peel off.

"You must stop a day to rest," he said to Hieronymus as he returned the empty bucket. "Just beyond the city, you'll come to a valley with a small brook and few trees. You've plenty of time to stay there a day or two."

"Do you think so?" the man asked.

"Now you see!" the woman exclaimed from within the wagon. "You see, you have plenty of time. How often have I told you that you'll kill us and the oxen with your crazy hurrying?"

Jeremiah went back to the animals. He took them by the horns. "Go on," he said. The oxen began to walk again.

For a few steps Jeremiah followed them. The wheels sang their unmelodic song and the face of Hieronymus Wollenweber swayed pale and oval, like the pendulum of a clock, back and forth in the darkness.

"There's no need to hurry now, Hieronymus," Jeremiah called after him. Then he was alone again; the night was soft and peaceful and the sky almost within reach.

A while later, as Jeremiah was passing St. John's Cathedral once more, a hand was laid on his shoulder. The touch was deliberate and solemn and when he turned his head he saw the pale face of the priest. "I was listening to you, Jeremiah Kentrup," he said.

Jeremiah nodded. "I know. I knew you were behind me."

The two men walked together through the dark city. Sometimes their arms touched; then again a gap would form between them and each was uncertain that the other was still there.

"Why were you silent?" Jeremiah asked finally.

"I had nothing more to say," Father Grégoire replied. "I cannot explain why. Several times I was about to interrupt you, but I could not find the proper words." He paused. "It was as though my reason was beclouded." Again he paused. There was no sound but the thud of boots on the hard ground, and even this was muffled because the street was unpaved.

When they came to the hotel where the Browns were staying, Jeremiah stopped.

"We all believe in the same God, Father Grégoire," he whispered, holding out his hand to the priest. "All that matters is that we really believe. Then we can testify. We can proclaim His Word wherever we may go, whether dressed in silks or in rags, whether we stutter and stammer or preach eloquently. Whether by day or by night; whenever it lies upon our hearts, we may speak of Him. And when this is so and He stands beside us, Father Grégoire, then our reason is beclouded. And the reason of others also is beclouded; they no longer hear with their ears, but with the pores of their skin; it is no longer the mind that makes sense out of the words, but the heart that senses the truth without mediation."

Jeremiah fell silent. He tilted his head a little to one side and listened. When the priest did not answer, he shook his hand and went into the hotel to say good-bye to the Browns.

He found them sitting at a small table in a corner of the dining-room. A kerosene lamp cast alternating patterns of light and shadow across their faces, and with every movement their expressions changed. Before them on the table stood a bottle of wine and half-emptied glasses. Johnny sat bent forward with his arms folded on the tabletop; Agnes was leaning back in her chair, her face inclined slightly upward. There was a faint flush on her cheeks and her forehead was damp. Her eyes seemed very black.

"I want to say good-bye to you," Jeremiah said, going up to them.

Agnes had not seen him coming. She started when she heard his voice. Johnny had been drinking; in his present state he was capable of anything. She looked anxiously at him and saw his eyes narrowing and his chin thrusting forward; his cheekbones stood out more prominently.

"Ah, his reverend the preacher," he said. "His reverend hasn't forgotten us, I see. Too bad. Very silly of his reverend. Where are all the visions and ghosts—haven't you brought them with you?"

Jeremiah smiled and put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "I've come to

thank you, Johnny," he said. "It was nice of you to let me ride along with you. It made everything so much easier. But now that's over. I'm riding on to-morrow morning. To Kansas. McPherson County."

"Don't tell me you'll risk leaving me alone with her?" Johnny said, nodding at Agnes.

Jeremiah looked at her. He saw that she was frightened. Her lips were slightly parted, and her eyes were slitted; she looked rather like a child close to tears.

"I don't understand," Jeremiah said. "Do you want me to stay with the two of you?"

Johnny laughed, then stopped abruptly. His face flamed and a vertical artery stood out on his forehead. The muscles on the sides of his neck grew taut.

Before he could reply, Agnes spoke. She whispered, and both men involuntarily leaned toward her to hear. "I can't go to Texas," she said. "I'll die before I get there. Johnny will have to bury me on the trail. One morning he'll wake up and I'll be dead. I'll die all alone at night."

Johnny's face had lost all colour. The artery in his forehead had relapsed beneath the skin. He rubbed his hand over the back of his head and squinted at the kerosene lamp. Then he reached for the glass of wine, but he did not pick it up because he became aware that his hand was trembling.

"I wanted so much to keep it a secret from you," Agnes went on. She spoke so softly, so gently and sadly, that the men set their jaws to endure it. "I haven't known about it very long. That time you two quarrelled was the first time I was sure. After that I had many attacks. Every time I told you to ride on awhile. And every time it got worse." She stopped, then began again with an effort. "That's why I can't go to Texas. It's too far. I would never get there." She took a small handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her forehead, the length of her thin nose, and then her lips. She seemed composed; her movements were deliberate; had it not been for the knowing sorrow in her voice, one might have thought her utterly unmoved.

"Have you seen a doctor?" Jeremiah asked with quiet friendliness. When she shook her head he said, "You ought to go and have yourself examined to-morrow morning."

"Of course," Johnny said with sudden urgency. "Can't you do it to-night? It doesn't matter what it costs. I have the money to make you well, Agnes, see? You're not poor any more, Agnes. You can have whatever you need."

"I don't want a doctor," Agnes said. "I don't want to know how I am, and I don't want you to know either, Johnny. What good is it if he says, she has so and so much time to live?" She looked down at her hands. She began to rub her fingers together. The delicate bracelet

Johnny had given her was loose on her wrist, and when she moved her arm it brushed against the table and made a faint, tinkling sound.

"I have only one desire," she said finally.

"What is that?" Johnny asked.

"I want to stay near Jeremiah. I'm lost without him. I know I must die wherever I am, but if he isn't there I'll be awfully frightened." She saw Johnny's hand clenching on the table. She reached forward and touched his fist with her thin, damp fingers. She shook her head. "You mustn't think anything bad of me because I say that, Johnny." She paused, pale, groping for words. Then she leaned forward and spoke so low that Johnny alone could hear. "I'm your wife, Johnny," she said. "I belong to you, to you alone, as long as I live. But when I die I must have someone by me who will show me the way. Someone to open the door and show me that it isn't so dreadfully dark beyond; that there's a little light and warmth and that it won't be so bad to step over the threshold. And because I may have to go any moment, I want to remain near him. That's the only reason, Johnny." She broke off. Johnny had laid his big hand on hers. "And Kansas won't be bad for you either," she added. "You can buy land cheaply. The farmers will be glad to sell out. You'll get it for nothing. And some day the locusts will be destroyed and you'll have the land. And then you'll raise herds in Kansas. Or plant wheat, or something." Johnny pressed her hand tightly. He looked at Jeremiah, who still stood in the same place, as though rooted there.

"We're travelling to Kansas with you," he said.

"But you can afford the railroad," Jeremiah protested.

"We'll buy a covered wagon," Agnes said. "And we'll put a regular bed in it for me. When I'm tired I'll lie down and then the two of you will ride me through the country and I'll have fresh air and open sky and smell the fields, and you'll imagine I'm a very rich and elegant lady and there's nothing wrong with me at all, it's just a whim of mine. Understand? Just a whim."

"You ought to go to a doctor," Jeremiah said again. But Agnes merely shook her head, and that was all there was to it.

Next morning they left the city. Johnny had bought a large covered wagon and Agnes lay inside on a bed. Before her she saw Johnny's broad back and a patch of the bright sky, and alongside, through a small hole in the canvas, Jeremiah, riding one of Johnny's horses. Behind the wagon his old horse walked, bearing nothing but its saddle blanket.

Father Grégoire looked out the window when they passed. Once more the thought came to him that he had seen this preacher somewhere before, but he could not recall where. Much later, when he happened upon his old French primer, he found the picture of St. John. He looked like a Breton peasant; his robe was frayed and torn, and he had drooping

shoulders, big hands and a beard. There was a smile on his face; above him the sun shone; and as a child Father Grégoire himself had drawn in St. John's hair with a golden-yellow crayon.

He wished he might have compared the image with the reality. But by this time Jeremiah Kentrup was almost at the border of Kansas, and Father Grégoire never did find out whether or not the St. John of his primer resembled Preacher Jeremiah Kentrup.

3

THEY SETTLE

ABOVE THE VALLEY of the Missouri River twilight rose every evening as a fine mist and hung for a while in the branches of the young oaks, before it dissolved into translucent darkness. All that remained of the filmy grey swaths was, at the last, a gossamer layer of dewdrops on grasses and leaves, and the scent of evening dampness in the air.

In the surrounding hills, however, night came invisibly. First it was no more than the shadow of a shadow; then it swam down from the sky and settled hesitantly on the dry earth between the stalks of wheat in the fields. Gradually it became stronger and thicker and clambered complacently over the still-warm clods of earth. From the wheatfields it crept over to the squash and cabbage, and from there to the road and the wheel ruts. When it at last became so strong that it enveloped all of the hills, the women lit lamps in their houses; and it was the first glow of light from the windows that declared finally and conclusively that night had fallen.

The farmers sat on benches in their kitchens and yawned. They had eaten soup, or stew, or buttermilk and dark, heavy bread; now they were tired. They sat stooped, propping their heads in their hands and spreading the toes of their bare feet, feeling their damp shirts gradually drying on their bodies. They heard their wives talking with the children, and the rattle of dishes; and now and then a moth fluttered against the window or a cow mooed out on the pasture.

The doors were open, and the smell of wood, of milk and of sweat-soaked clothes mingled with the fragrant breath of the night that was borne silently through the open door.

Gradually the women finished their work. They wiped their hands on many-coloured towels and took the pins out of their hair. The children undressed and crawled into their beds. By twos and threes they lay together and talked for a while before they fell asleep. The women took off their aprons and opened their blouses; they smoothed their skirts and sometimes they cast a secret glance at their husbands, who still sat

immobile. From a pail they poured water into a basin. Then they washed their faces, took off their shoes and put their feet in the water. They bent down and scraped away the little crusts of dirt that had settled between their toes. Then they sat quiet, enjoying the coolness of the water on the soles of their feet and the night air on their bare arms and their throats.

Then the men got up. They slipped into their boots, took a lantern and shuffled to the barn once more. They looked up at the sky, and then toward the side from which the wind must come if there was to be rain. But the stars were bright and the air motionless as it had been for weeks. Their lanterns made a small round glow on the ground, and every blade of grass created a shadow. The wheels of the hay wagon were illuminated, and the harrow, the plough, the sludge pump, the pile of chips, and finally the barn doors.

The men walked past behind the animals. They knew where each stood, even without seeing their hindquarters. Some were lying on the chaff, their bellies swelling out to one side and their ribs prominent. A few flies were awakened by the light and flew against the lanterns. The pigs in the sty began to snort.

Then the men returned. They walked slowly because they were a little afraid to enter their houses. Slowly their boots shuffled over the hard soil; the women in the houses, hearing them coming, slipped into their beds and closed their eyes. The men hesitated before they entered. They blew out the lanterns and then stood motionless. There were crickets, and in the distance a hoot owl or a coyote; there were bats, and there was the house and the glow of light that fell through the door. In the sky was the shimmer of a moon still not risen. And then there was something else, something unusual. Perhaps it was only the stillness of the air, for there was not the faintest breath of wind; the wheat did not rustle, the grass did not stir, and the leaves on the trees hung lifeless. But perhaps, too, it was something uncanny. A kind of omen. Like when the weather-cock had fallen from the church tower before the great fire. Or like when the clock had struck thirteen the night before Father died. Or when a blood-red sky had given forewarning of the war, in Grandfather's day.

Then the men entered their houses; and when in the darkness of their beds the women began to speak of these things, they laughed at them and turned on their sides. They pushed the pillow to rights beneath their heads and felt the sheets fold softly into the hollows of their bodies. They heard the children snoring faintly, and they waited for the even breathing of their wives.

They yawned and drew their heads down into their shoulders, and after a while they forgot everything and fell asleep.

But the land curved into hills and sank down into valleys, and wheat grew out of the earth, wheat and corn and millet and grama grass. And among the fields stood the farmhouses. When the moon rose, their white

walls were visible, whitewashed wood and straw roofs. Like black snakes the great trails crawled through the land, from south to north, from east to west; in the towns lamps still burned here and there and men stumbled drunkenly along the stone walls of buildings. Herds spent the nights pressed close together, in small glens, and cowboys rode circling around them, now and then falling into a doze in their saddles. The world was the same as it had always been.

Everywhere. Except far in the west, on the border between Kansas and Colorado. Here there was a strange movement upon the land, in spite of the stillness. The shadows of the trees on moonlit ground showed branches that seemed swollen with formless sores, and the grass and flowers cast no shadows at all. They had vanished; the meadow seemed flat, and as though a greenish-brown slime had covered them completely, in the midst of which, like will-o'-the-wisps, the wings of locusts glittered now and then.

It was still dark when Martin Miller awoke. He did not need a clock. He knew it must be between four and half-past four. He sat up on the edge of his bed and lit a candle. His bare feet touched the sandy floor, and before he drew on his woollen socks he brushed his soles with the palm of his hand to remove the grains of sand that clung to them. His legs were thin and hairy; his nightshirt came down barely to his knees. It was white, with a red hem.

He stood up and took in his hand the blue candleholder. The light flickered over the other bed, where Caroline slept. She lay on her side and Miller could see only her back. She was wearing a nightcap. Her head was sunk deep into the red-and-white checked pillow; her mouth was almost touching her tightly folded hands, as though she had fallen asleep in the midst of her prayers the night before.

Miller took his boots in his hand and his trousers on his arm and tip-toed to the door. It was not yet time for his wife to rise. She would awaken at daybreak. She had the right to sleep this much longer.

The hinges of the door squeaked slightly. He would have to oil them when he had time. He stood in the parlour and yawned. The room smelled of food, and faintly of the fresh wood he had used in building. He heard the clock ticking in its corner. When he passed it, he lifted the candle. The face was painted green, with gold curliques in the centre. The long pendulum, with its disk as large as a buckwheat cake, swung slowly back and forth. The bronze weights hung motionless on their chains and the light of the candle was reflected in the metal. It was twenty-five after four.

He blew out the candle and placed it on a chair that was put here by the door every night for this purpose. Then he went out. The stars were not so bright as they had been in the middle of the night, but to his eyes

they seemed radiant and sparkling. The moon still stood high in the sky. The outlines of a well and a hay wagon were visible.

A cat rubbed against his leg. With his free hand he reached down to scratch its back. The cat uttered a low, plaintive sound. When he walked on, it followed him.

He came to the well and groped for the washboard that lay on the floor. He knew the soap must be there. When he had found it, he took off his nightshirt and bent under the pump. He began to pump. His movements were careful and conscientious, as they were in everything. The water was ice-cold, and the first stream almost took his breath away. He clenched his teeth. Then he began breathing regularly again.

When he had dried himself, he drew on his trousers and slipped into his boots. He hung the towel on the clothes line and looked around. As he had expected, day was dawning.

He returned to the house. When he entered, he left the door open to allow the fresh morning air to fill the rooms. He lit the candle again and went through the parlour into the bedroom. With the tip of his index finger he touched his wife's shoulder.

"Caroline," he said.

The woman opened her eyes. For a while she lay motionless. Then she turned over and looked at him. He stood before her naked to the waist, still holding the candle in his hand. His skin had lost the yellowish hue it had acquired in Topeka; it was tanned now. There were wrinkles around his eyes and in the corners of his mouth. He was unshaven.

"Good morning, Martin," she said.

He placed the candle on the night table, bent down and kissed his wife's forehead.

She smiled faintly. She smelled the fresh and somewhat harsh scent of the soap.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"I don't think I fell asleep until late," he answered, drawing his shirt over his head. He sat on the edge of the bed and tied his boots. The sky was already growing lighter in the small square windows. A film of dewdrops covered the panes.

"How is the weather?" Caroline asked.

"Fine, and no wind as usual."

He went to the door. Caroline still lay in bed. She did not like getting up while he was still there. A peculiar twilight filled the room. He reached for the doorknob. Then he paused and glanced once more at his wife, who lay motionless gazing at the ceiling. He thought she was about to say something. But she seemed not to be aware that he was still in the room. Her thin mouth was tightly shut and the gentle light of the candle made her features softer than they were. She looked younger.

"You ought to get up," he said, and left the room.

"Yes," she replied, but he was already out of hearing.

She began to dress. Carefully she contrived it so that she was not altogether naked even for a moment. She washed in a small basin which she filled from an enamelled jug. She opened the window and hung out the bedclothes. Then she went into the small partitioned room back of the parlour to awaken Lydia.

Meanwhile full daylight had come. The front door was still open and Caroline saw that the morning was calm and clear. It was dark where Lydia slept, because the small window high up near the ceiling admitted almost no light. The girl had insisted on having her bed in this room; and finally they had yielded to her.

She awoke when Caroline entered.

"What's the matter?" she asked, sitting up.

"Good morning, Lydia," her mother said. She went to the girl's bed and kissed her, as she did every morning.

"I've had a horrible dream," Lydia said. She brushed her hand over her forehead. "Horrible." She shook her head. There was a deep fold over her narrow eyes. "It's funny," she went on, "I never remember what I've dreamed." She looked at her mother quizzically. "Do you really never dream?"

"Never."

"And didn't you used to dream?"

"I think I've always been too tired to dream."

Lydia shrugged. With her big hands she began unplaiting her braids. Her hair was dry and when she took it in her fingers the strands fell apart by themselves.

"In a minute," she said, without looking at her mother.

A little later they breakfasted. Martin Miller recited a prayer and then they began to eat. They did not talk much. They had bread and butter and milk. They sat upright, without resting their arms, and Caroline watched anxiously to be sure her husband had all he wanted. Often the ticking of the big clock was the only sound.

The first rays of the sun came through the window. Where they struck the wall the wood grew bright, and the whole room seemed more friendly. It was almost possible to forget that this was only a beginning; that they had had no time for improvements. First the land had to be conquered; then one could think of laying a wooden floor in the house. Then would come curtains, and paint and varnish.

The women finished first. They put down their knives and waited. Their hands were clasped on the table. They held their heads lowered and their shoulders stooped slightly forward.

When Miller had put the last piece of bread in his mouth, he stood up. He stood behind his chair and folded his hands on the back. Then he spoke the Lord's Prayer. He spoke in his ordinary voice, quietly,

measuredly. After the Amen he went to the cabinet. He took his big straw hat and placed it on his head. He kissed both women and glanced once more at the clock.

Then he went out.

Lydia cleared the table. She wore sabots on her big feet. Her mother had gone to the barn. The room was the same as it had been since the house was first built. The chairs with their straight backs and the linen her grandmother had woven; the Lutheran Bible and the leather-bound hymnbooks of the Mennonites; the samovar in the kitchen and the round, gold-rimmed wooden plates; the smell, and the floor and the sun.

She went to the well to wash the dishes. From the barn she heard the milk pails rattling. They were too heavy for her mother; she was small and frail. Sometimes she was very pale when she came from the barn. But she did not complain and asked no one for help.

Lydia pumped the water. When she pressed on the lever, the pump sighed, and the water gushed spasmodically. As it rose in the bucket, the tone rose, until the bucket was filled and ran over.

Lydia stood on the damp ground with legs wide apart, her left hand resting on her hip. Through her dress she could feel the coarse bone of her hip. She was glad the pump made so much noise and drowned out the rattling of the milk pails in the barn. No, no, she would not help her mother. No one tried to help her. She was as alone as if she lived on a desert island. But she was strong. Thank God, she was strong. And she had built a wall around herself. All around and so high that no one could see the kind of life she led.

When Caroline Miller came from the barn and saw that Lydia was still standing by the well, she set down the milk pails and stood still.

"Lydia," she called, "how long are you going to take with the dish-washing?"

The girl released the pump. The handle sank slowly and the stream of water thinned to a trickle. She did not answer her mother. She bent down. For a moment she saw her image mirrored in the water. There was a kind of smile around her mouth, but her eyes were small and angry. Then she reached into the bucket and began taking out cups and plates.

Her mother still stood behind her, between the barn and the house. She had folded her hands at her waist. Her face was pale and she felt the sweat on her nostrils. She shook her head. "I never saw anything like it," she grumbled.

She picked up the heavy pails again. The veins on the back of her hands were thick and she had to grip the handles tightly in order to keep them from slipping out of her wet hands. She walked with a stoop,

carrying the pails just above the ground, and guiding her steps carefully around pieces of wood and stones.

At the door of the house she set down her burden with deliberation. She wiped her fingers on her apron and rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. Behind her she heard the dishes rattling as Lydia dried and piled them. Then she turned. She could see how lazily the girl was moving. She rubbed the yellow cloth slowly around the rim of the plates and bent leisurely down for the next plate. Stealing the Lord's good time, Caroline thought. She opened her mouth to call out angrily. She wanted to say something that would hurt Lydia. But she thought better of it, shrugged her shoulders, picked up the pails and went into the house.

Lydia knew without looking what was going on behind her. She had heard her mother set down the milk pails before the door. She drew her head into her shoulders, as though shrinking from an expected blow. She waited for her mother to call out, and was surprised when nothing happened. She was almost sorry. Her muscles relaxed. She bent down and emptied the water from the bucket. Then she dried her arms and hands on her apron and went back to the living-room.

She began putting the dishes in their place in the cabinet. In the adjoining kitchen she heard her mother. She knew she was kneeling before the stove and filling it with straw that had been mixed with dried manure. She heard the crackle and snap of straw and thought she could smell the fine straw dust in the air.

Then everything grew quiet. Her mother was looking for the matches. Or perhaps she was kneeling motionless and listening.

"Lydia."

The girl started.

"What?"

"You must go to Father. We must get the hay in to-day. I'm afraid of the weather."

Lydia stood unmoving, her eyes following the clock pendulum.

"What's wrong with the weather?" she asked.

"I don't know. But it hasn't rained for a long time."

Lydia did not say anything. She leaned against the cabinet and closed her eyes. The ticking of the clock was loud and disquieting as a strange footstep in the night. There was something in the air. Something threatening.

"Did you hear me?" her mother said.

"Yes, Mother."

She did not move. She saw her mother's cool eyes and quiet face and her rigid neck, and she saw her back was straight and erect even when she knelt on the floor.

"Lydia."

"Yes, Mother."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Don't you feel something dreadful is going to happen?"

"Maybe there'll be a thunderstorm. You shouldn't be afraid of that."

Lydia heard her striking a match. The straw began to burn. It made a low, hissing sound. Now her mother closed the little cast-iron fire box door.

"It won't matter unless the hay is wetted," she said; by her changed voice Lydia could tell she had stood up. "Go on, Lydia, get a move on. Do you hear?"

Wordlessly, Lydia left the house. Caroline Miller stood in the kitchen and listened as the girl's heavy, shuffling step slowly faded away. Then she set a big washboiler on the stove, filled with clothes she had soaked overnight. For a moment she listened to the crackling of the fire. Then, certain that it was going well, she took her hoe and went out to the garden.

Lydia walked leisurely through the village. The first settlers had named it Gnadenau, in honour of the divine grace (*Gnade*) they hoped would be granted them. They had arrived in the evening, and the following morning they had divided up the land. By noon the most enterprising had begun to build their houses, and when the sun rose the next day even the most laggard were at work. They had finished the dwellings in a few days. They had set up their beds, placed their tables and benches and chairs in the rooms, and one morning they had hitched their oxen to the plough and ridden out into the prairie. After they drew the first furrow they stopped and inspected the earth. It was dark and rich and fertile, yet not too heavy. It was mixed with sand and bits of limestone; even heavy rains would not harm the seed in such soil. The settlers had nodded their heads and called to the oxen, and gradually the ancient fallow land had been transformed into the fields and meadows and gardens of the Mennonites of Gnadenau.

Lydia knew every step of the way. In the village all was still. The people were in the fields and the houses along the road seemed asleep. Many looked like tents. They had slanting walls of wood and roofs of prairie grass. Others were made of adobe, and still others of sun-dried bricks. All stood on the north side of the street, so that the sun could shine into their windows all day long. Most of the settlers had already provided for the winter; great stacks of straw and piles of dried manure lay beside the houses.

Lydia felt the warmth of the sun on her shoulders. She walked with lowered head, the broad brim of her straw hat shading her face. A few children sat on a stone and played with a dog. "Good morning, Aunt Lydia," they said. "Good morning, children," Lydia replied. She stood still. Each of the children held out its hand to her and then they stood around and gazed up at her. She knew all their names; but even without

names she would have known whose children they were. They looked like their elders, and their freckled children's faces already had some of their elders' measuredness and control.

At the end of the village was the common land. They had made a large garden here, and planted it in watermelons. A few girls or women were at work some distance from the road. Lydia could not see them, but she felt their eyes upon her. Perhaps they were making remarks. Perhaps they were laughing spitefully, or merely gazing at her out of cold and hostile eyes.

Lydia straightened up. She made her shoulders broad and her back erect and tried to set her big feet evenly and surely. The road was irregular and full of wheel ruts; and when she stumbled she felt the perspiration spring out on her forehead. She clenched her teeth and closed her hands to fists; even her toes tightened. Not until she descended into a small glen, out of sight of the women, did she relax into her accustomed slouch.

She found her father near the brook. He was digging ditches to guide the water over a large patch of land. He had planned it carefully, and before he began work he had marked out the channels with chips of wood. It was an ingenious system; some day, he thought, the entire settlement would profit by it.

When he saw his daughter coming, he stopped digging. He folded his hands over the handle of the spade and waited unmoving until she came up to him.

"Mother sent me," Lydia said. "She thinks the weather will turn and she says I ought to help you get in the hay."

Miller tilted his head and looked at the sky. He narrowed his eyes and wrinkled his brow, and his lower lip thrust forward a little.

He doubted that his wife was right. The air was clear and transparent and the sky cloudless and deep blue. The only suspicious sign was the complete lack of wind. Still, he had mowed the meadow three days before and the grass was dry; there was no reason for not getting it in to-day rather than to-morrow. There wasn't any too much of it in any case; it would be frivolous to take risks with their first harvest.

"Perhaps mother is right," he said. Slowly he walked down to the little path that ran along the brook to the mowing.

Lydia walked behind him. He was carrying the spade on his shoulder, and during the whole way he did not once look back at his daughter. He took wide, even steps and set his feet in their heavy boots squarely on the ground.

When they came to the mowing, he bent down and picked up a handful of hay. He rubbed it between his fingers. It was quite dry; there was no sense waiting another day. The pitchforks lay beside the road; father and daughter began to work.

By noon they had tumbled the hay into small mounds. They had spoken little and scarcely looked at each other, and they had not paused for breath. With obstinate tenacity they had rolled up the long lines of dry stalks and carried them in small bundles up the slope on the teeth of their forks. At the last they had scraped together the scatterings they had overlooked or lost during the tumbling. Their lips were tight, their faces sweaty and their eyes hard and indifferent. They spoke in cool voices and were chary of words.

Lydia was the first to see the man running down the slope on the other side of the brook. From the bank upward the land did not belong to the Gnadenau settlement.

He was far away and little more than a dark moving figure at first. The grass and underbrush was so thick that he sometimes ran aimlessly back and forth before he found a place where he could force his way through. Martin Miller, too, had seen him. He held his hand over his eyes and leaned forward slightly. He was nearsighted, and everything at a distance was obscured in a faint haze for him.

The man had now come to a small clearing. Lydia could see him clearly. He was hatless and had light-blond hair that glistened in the sun. He stood still suddenly. He seemed to have seen them. He raised his arm and waved; then he funnelled his hands over his mouth. A moment later, long-drawn and incomprehensible, came his cry.

"Who is it?" Miller asked.

"A stranger," Lydia replied. "None of our people, I'm certain."

Miller dropped his hand from his eyes. "I think we'll go," he said.

Lydia seemed not to hear him. The man on the slope had begun to run again. He must have been utterly exhausted, for he fell repeatedly, and each time he got up and began to run again he swayed.

"Did you hear me, Lydia?" Miller asked. He knew suddenly that the man must be Albert Parker. He had met him once, when the Mennonites went to buy from him the slope he was now descending. It had been in Parker's hut. The man had laughed at them and said he didn't need their money. He had virtually thrown them out, and when they crossed the yard they met the woman that lived with him—no one knew whether they had ever been married decently in a Christian church.

They had gone home, the matter of the purchase unsettled. For a time all sorts of wild rumours about the Parkers circulated, but after a while they had been forgotten and no one had ever seen them again.

Miller took his daughter by the hand.

"We're going," he said. "Do you hear? We're going."

Lydia felt her father's fingers. They were hard and dry, as though wooden tongs had been fastened around her wrist. She spread her feet wider apart the better to resist him, and then she began bending her forearm inward, bracing her elbow against her father's shoulder. She

felt the sweat of his hands on her skin and she saw how his muscles tautened. His grip became tighter. She compressed her lips to keep from crying out. He'll break my bones, she thought. God in heaven, he's breaking my bones. She began to breathe faster and heard her teeth scraping together. The pain became more and more piercing and intolerable; her eyes grew hot and a haze spread over the sunny landscape.

There was a choking sensation in her throat. She swallowed several times to avoid vomiting. She opened her mouth and tried to suck air into her lungs. She felt that it was only a thin stream of air that flowed down her throat. She could feel the pores of her skin compressing and squeezing the sweat out of her body.

She was wet through, her forehead and neck and breast and arms and the wrist under her father's fingers. His fingers lost their hold on her skin, slipped away, loosened and gripped again, then slid up her forearm to her elbow. Once more they clenched. The broken-nailed finger tips bored into her skin and flesh as though to tear a piece away.

Then it was suddenly over. It was hot and quiet and her clothes clung to her body; her lips were dry and she slowly drew her feet together and stood erect. She brushed her hand over her eyes, and the land became clear once more; the colours returned. Green and brown the slope was; the grass glistened and the hay tumbles made small round shadows. The man's face was visible now, although he was far down in the valley and just beginning to ascend the hill.

Miller stood silent, panting heavily, beside his daughter. His face was hard. His eyes were half shut, his jaw jutting. His fingers pained him; he moved them to relax the stiffness. With his other hand he rubbed his wrist. He began to pray silently. "Let me be strong, God," he prayed. "Let me have the strength to act in righteousness and to master my passions. Make my judgment just and give clarity to my eyes." He felt the heat and the stillness and the sweat in his clothes. The ground underfoot seemed to be swaying gently. He shook his head. This was beyond understanding. He must speak with Caroline. He must get the oxen and the wagon and take in the hay. He must dig ditches and irrigate the land and obey the laws of God. Where was he now? O God, where was he now?

They could hear the stranger panting up the hill. His clothes were tattered and full of burrs. He walked with toes turned out to avoid sliding down the cropped grass of the slope. His head was lowered and thrust forward, so that his long arms almost touched the ground. When he was a few yards away from them he raised his head. He had a round face and a broad nose, and the eyes of a small boy.

"I'm Albert Parker," he said.

Miller was silent. His face was expressionless, as though he had not heard.

"We are the Millers," Lydia said.

"I remember," Parker said. "I've come to ask you for help. My wife is sick. She's fainted. Her face is white. But she's alive. I'm sure of that, her heart is beating. Someone must come. She's all alone. There's nobody but the two of us, nobody."

It was hard to understand him. His words tumbled over one another and his breathing was one long gasp. When Miller did not reply, his confusion increased.

"She's expecting, you see," he said. "She's so young and works like a horse and she's not used to it."

Lydia interrupted him. "Come," she said. "I don't know much about sickness and those things, but it's better if somebody is with her."

She began to descend the hill. Parker stood uncertain for a moment and looked at Miller.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll see her back, of course," he added. "I'll bring her back as soon as possible."

Miller gazed after them. They grew smaller; they were running at top speed. Their knees were bent and they leaned backward from the waist. Soon they reached the bank of the brook.

"Lydia!" Miller called.

His voice was muffled. There was no echo. She could not hear him; it was too far.

He cupped his hands over his mouth.

"Lydia!" he shouted again.

It must be the air that was smothering his voice. It was almost as though it choked the sound back in his throat. As though his mouth were wadded with cotton wool. He took a few steps down the hill. Then he stopped. The two were already at the brook. They vanished beyond the hazel-nut bushes. Then they appeared again, moving from stepping-stone to stepping-stone as they crossed the brook.

After crossing the brook, Lydia and Parker paused for a moment.

"We ought to keep as far to the right as possible," Parker said.

Lydia nodded. Her wrist hurt and her knees were weak, and she could still feel the descent in her legs. She could not think. Had she lost her mind? she wondered. Perhaps this haze all around her meant that she had gone mad.

Silently she followed Parker upward along the brook. Like a cat he wound his way through the underbrush. He took long, anxious strides, pausing now and then to look back at Lydia.

"Are you following?"

"Yes," Lydia replied shortly.

Then they began to ascend the other slope. Tenaciously, the grass clung to their feet. The long runners of the blackberry bushes caught in

their clothes and held fast; the fern blocked their path with its broad leaves. Small rocks hidden under moss suddenly sprang out of the earth all around them. They crouched on the ground like dark-grey animals with round backs. The sun had warmed them, and their moss-covered surface was resilient as a living body. Among these rocks were dark, deep gaps that could easily trip you, and here and there grew yellow stonecrop and small clumps of grass.

Parker remained in the lead. The sweat on his sunburned neck glistened and the muscles of his back were tense; the noise of his breathing was loud and whistling. He clambered with the agility of some mountain creature, clinging to rocks with his hands and thrusting himself forward with powerful legs, his face barely above the ground.

As they climbed Lydia became increasingly aware of Parker's presence. At first she had scarcely noticed him. He was a shadow whose course she followed. A thing unalive that had no connection with her. What did she care about Parker? She had what she wanted. She had conquered her father—that was enough. She had been the stronger. In the end it had done him no good that he had almost crushed her wrist. It was the will that counted. Who had the stronger will, that was all, all that mattered.

The distance between her and Parker had increased. He was far ahead now and waiting for her. She felt him watching her every movement. She was caught by a blackberry bush, and when she bent over to free her dress from the thorns she fell to the ground.

"I'm coming," he called.

"No."

Her voice was agitated. She reached for the branch and tore it free. Then she propped herself on her hands, drew her legs up beneath her and forced herself erect. She felt that she was swaying. She closed her eyes.

"Go on," she called. "Go on, do you hear?" She turned and looked back down the valley. She saw the mown meadow and the mounds of hay that she and her father had tumbled a few hours before, and far up the opposite slope she saw the narrow path where they had been standing when Parker came. Father must have gone home; he would fetch the oxen and the wagon, and perhaps he would sit down at the big table with her mother and relate the whole tale, quietly, calmly. And then they would take out the Bible, and he would put on his glasses and begin to read aloud.

Behind her she heard Parker's step. He was almost upon her when she turned again.

"Please forgive me for dragging you up here," he said. "It's a hell of a way."

"Why don't you go on?"

"I thought I might be able to help you."

"No."

Lydia began walking.

"It's awfully decent of you to come up," he said, walking at her side. "I think Patricia'll be glad to have a woman help her a little. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps I can't help her at all."

"You don't think it's anything bad, do you?"

Lydia gazed straight ahead. The hill was flattening out. Now they were wading through grass that reached to their hips; the blackberries and the rocks were behind them.

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. Then, feeling Parker's anxious gaze, she added after a pause, "I don't think so."

The valley was far behind them when the house came into view. It was a square splash of brown upon the landscape, and all the land seemed flat as far as they could see.

"There it is," Parker said, quickening his step. They were following a wagon trail now that ran between two fields of corn. The corn stood in long, straight rows, and the house seemed to have grown up out of the middle of it. It had a pointed roof of prairie grass, on which the sunlight shimmered softly.

At the end of the cornfields was a small garden. They had planted beans, cabbage and tomatoes. Among the vegetables they had set out apricot trees, and here and there sunflowers stood with gently bowed heads, motionless in the sunlight.

"Hello," Parker called.

The front door was open. The doorway was a big rectangular hole, and in the windows at either side of it the sun gleamed.

A woman came to the door. She stopped on the threshold and held her hand over her eyes. She wore a bright kerchief on her head; her arms were deeply tanned.

"That isn't Patricia," Parker said. He began running so fast that Lydia could scarcely keep up with him. "Some stranger. I never saw her before."

"What's the matter?" he demanded when he reached the door. "Where is . . ."

"Calm yourself," the woman said. "Everything is all right." She came out. Her eyes were brown, and all around them was a webwork of fine lines. Her voice had a lilting quality and her words were clear, in spite of her broken English.

Parker rushed past her into the house. Lydia stood where she was. All at once she was terribly weary. She leaned against the wall of the house and closed her eyes. She dropped her arms. Her fingers tapped against the sod of the house.

The woman was still standing near the door.

"Don't you feel well?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," Lydia said. "I'm just tired."

"Maybe you ought to rest awhile."

Lydia did not move. She leaned her head back and let the sun lave her face.

"I am Clara Bieber," the woman said. "We live not far from here. I went the wrong way and came by here to ask. Then the woman was sick and all alone so I helped her."

Lydia understood it all; she was glad that someone was talking to her. She opened her eyes slightly. She saw the grey-brown soil of the garden and the shadows of the cabbages and beans on the ground, and farther back were the green cornfields and in the distance a bright sky.

"I think I must go," Clara Bieber said. "My man comes home soon and the baby is alone. I wanted to find a man named Clark somewhere near. We wanted to buy a bed for the baby."

When Lydia said nothing, she smoothed her apron and tied her kerchief tighter. Then she looked toward the small path she must take. A cricket began to chirp and the straw roof crackled under the sun's rays. A hen cackled and a cat slunk silently down the rows of cabbages.

"I think I must go," Clara said again. "I have almost an hour's walk. I guess it must be almost four o'clock." She paused. "You know," she went on, "to-day is the first time I left Michael alone. He is getting to be a big boy—and he looks just like my man."

She fell silent. Within the house a door was shut and steps approached.

"Forgive me for not asking you in," Parker said when he came out. He gazed with friendly eyes at Lydia, and when she did not reply he turned to Clara.

"It was very good of you, helping Patricia," he said awkwardly. "We're so glad you live nearby. We always thought we were all alone up here. Won't you go in and see her again for a moment? I think it's about the baby—she wants to talk to you about it."

"I guess I can stay a few minutes longer," Clara said.

"And you?" Parker asked, looking at Lydia.

"Oh?" She paused. "I must go," she said. "Yes, I must go."

"Don't you want to meet Patricia?"

Lydia shook her head. "No," she said, "I think it's better if I go right away. I have a long way. I only came because I thought she was sick. That's the only reason. And now I really have no business being here."

Parker stood motionless. Suddenly he was aware of the heat and the utter lack of wind. He put his hands in his pockets and his eyes were both scornful and sad.

Lydia did not look at him. Her thin lips were compressed so that her mouth was a straight line. She had straightened up and run her hands

through her dry hair. She had the feeling that the voice that spoke to her came from far away, that it was strange and hostile like most of the voices that addressed her. How good it was that she had her wall about her, her protecting wall, that guarded her against the most determined enemies.

"You needn't bother to accompany me," she said. "I can make it perfectly well alone. And if I hurry I may get back in time to help father with the haying. Your wife may need you meanwhile." She took a few hesitant steps.

"I think I will go in for a while," said Clara, who was still standing in the doorway.

Lydia stopped and turned around. "Oh, yes, go in, Mrs. Bieber," she said. "And give the patient my best regards. Do you hear, Mrs. Bieber? My best regards." Her voice was bitter and her eyes angry. Abruptly she turned and strode away. Her movements were angular; she swung her long arms and her shoulders seemed hunched forward.

Parker followed her. He did not want to catch up, but he also did not want to lose sight of her. After a while she looked around and saw him. She did not stop. She raised her eyebrows and shook her head; then she lengthened her stride. Because she was walking along the wagon trail, her feet kicked up a cloud of dust. When she saw that the dust trail hung motionless in the air, she felt glad that Parker would have to swallow it.

When she came to the slope, she ran back and forth until Parker lost her trail. Then she descended slowly and cautiously. How wonderful it was to be alone. She heard nothing but the rustle of the grass and the cracking of dried branches, and when she stood still for a moment, the pounding of her own heart. She sat down on a stone. It was warm from the sun. Soon twilight would fall. A peaceful darkness would settle down and envelop the land. She was terribly weary. She laid her face in her hands. It was good when someone touched your face softly. Soothing. You could rest quiet and forget everything. You could become warm and relaxed and you could even smile.

And cry.

Martin Miller gazed at his wife. She was standing high up on the hay wagon, peering, her hand shading her eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"She's fallen," Caroline replied.

Miller's expression did not change. Over his head he held on the fork a heavy ball of hay. Slowly, swaying slightly, he carried it to the wagon. Carefully he tilted his load forward and pushed it up so that Caroline could take it on her fork.

"Load," he said when she did not move.

Caroline lowered her hand and grasped her fork again. She leaned

forward, drove the fork into the centre of the bundle and tugged the hay to the centre of the wagon.

"Don't you think you ought to see about Lydia, Martin?" she asked.

Miller shook his head, without turning. He went to the tumble of hay and picked up another bundle on his fork.

Again Caroline gazed toward where she had last seen Lydia. The girl was still on the ground.

"She may have hurt herself, Martin," she said. Dusk was already falling; the light was dim and the outlines of objects were beginning to flow together.

"It will be dark in a few minutes," she added when her husband came to the wagon again.

"Load," he said.

Again she reached out with her fork and tugged the hay on to the wagon.

She had to distribute it. She took small layers on her fork and tamped them down over the wagon. One had to load evenly to take advantage of the racks. In the end it must look like the roof of a covered wagon.

When she looked for Lydia again, she saw that the girl was close to the brook. In a few minutes she would reach them. Thank God, she was back again.

Miller brought the last forkful of hay.

"We're finished," he said.

Caroline worked slowly, now and then peering down into the valley. In the distance she could see Lydia. By imperceptible stages the girl was approaching them. She must be very tired, for she held her hands against her thighs, as though her legs alone did not have the strength for the ascent.

Miller had picked up a stick.

"All right?" he said.

He stood beside the team of oxen, looking up at his wife.

"Don't you want to wait for Lydia, Martin?" she asked softly.

He shook his head and took one of the oxen by the horns.

"Get on," he said.

When the animal did not move, he rapped it lightly with his stick. The ox braced its hoofs against the ground and took a step forward. The wheels began to groan and the wagon moved. The load swayed on the uneven ground, and Caroline had to sit down hastily.

As long as she could, she helplessly watched the girl climbing the hill. She saw how Lydia stood motionless for a while and then slowly sank down on the meadow. She must have seen that they were not waiting. Or perhaps she was so exhausted she could not go on.

"Martin," Caroline said.

"What?" he asked, looking up at her.

"Oughtn't we wait for Lydia?"

"No."

"Isn't this a sin, what we're doing?"

"No."

They had now reached the wagon trail. Miller braced his shoulder against the flank of the outside ox to swing the team around. Awkwardly the oxen obeyed. Then they stood still.

"Martin," Caroline said again. Her voice was tremulous and very low. But the wagon was standing still, noiseless, in the midst of the dust it had raised, and so he heard her. He raised his head.

"Is it about Lydia?"

"No, about me. I just can't do it. Let me wait for her alone. Please, for my sake."

Miller was silent for a while. There was still a shimmer of light in the sky, and Caroline could see that his face was weary, sad and old.

"Get down," he said.

He stood in front of the team and held one hand against the heads of each of the oxen to hold them steady while Caroline was clambering down.

She slipped forward and slid down the load until her feet touched the shafts. She came to the ground between the oxen and the wagon.

"You're not angry, Martin?" she asked softly.

"No," he replied, "but I don't understand you. I don't think you're doing her any good by waiting for her. I don't think that sort of thing will bring her back to the path of righteousness. There's something evil in her, something of the devil."

He fell silent and struck the oxen with his stick.

"Get on," he said. Again the animals began to move. For a few steps Caroline followed. "You're not angry with me, Martin?" she asked again. He shook his head in silence. He was gazing straight ahead and his big straw hat cast a shadow over his face.

"I may be home late," she said. "I've cooked supper . . ."

"Good night, Caroline," he said brusquely.

She took another hesitant step, as though to go on with him; then she stopped.

"God bless you, Martin," she called after him, and turned back toward the meadow.

By the time she reached the place where Martin had turned the team, it was dark. She took a few cautious steps toward the slope. Then she stood still and began to call. Her voice was high and her cry like the cry of some night bird. But only a few yards away the sound was swallowed in the windless air and silence surrounded her like a fluffy cloak.

Step by step she groped her way forward. She felt the moisture of the stubble grass on her feet and the murmuring coolness of the air at her back. Now and then she supported herself with her hands on the ground

and let herself slide down into small depressions. Then she stood again to catch her breath, call and listen; and again only the sounds of the meadow answered her.

She did not know how far she had descended, but it seemed to her she must be reaching the valley soon. She stood still and inclined her head forward—yes, that must be the splashing of the brook. Perhaps Lydia was near and would not answer to frighten her. Perhaps she had deliberately hidden herself in the bushes and was sitting tight-lipped, smiling maliciously as she sometimes did.

A sudden rage overcame her. She hated this girl who was humiliating her and making her life miserable; it would be her fault if they lost the divine blessing. She hated her for stealing the strength from her body and the peace from her heart, for making her weak and a mockery in the community. She hated her for being different and not belonging to them, for scorning the commandments of God. She called again, but now her voice was shrill and tense; it sounded as though she was spewing the words from her mouth.

When no answer came, she groped on the ground to find a place where she could sit down. Her fingers sank into a loamy mass. She considered for a moment and realized that it must be the droppings from their oxen. She wiped her hand on the grass and smiled. She had deceived herself. She was not down in the valley yet. She was still high up and Lydia was not hiding from her. She had done her an injustice. It was hard for her too, the girl. That affair in Topeka and the fever and their hard life—perhaps it was all too much for her.

Quickly, she went on. Sometimes she looked up at the star that she had chosen to mark the way back for her. It was bluish-white and flickering and stood just above the upper limit of the meadow. As long as she could see it she would not lose her way; everything would be all right if only she could find Lydia.

As she approached the floor of the valley her cries were echoed. It was the cliff on the other side that returned her voice, and for a while she enjoyed listening to the delicate overtones. But after a few steps the echo died and sound was damped again as it had been before.

At first she thought she saw a white stone lying on the meadow. Then she recognized Lydia, sleeping in the grass. She heard her breathing, and a sense of great relief overwhelmed her. She touched the girl on the shoulder.

"What's the matter?" Lydia started up.

"It's Mother," Caroline said quietly. "Mother."

"Oh."

She spoke softly and sadly, like one who has been awakened from a pleasant dream.

"I've been searching for you. Come, let's go home."

Caroline knelt on the ground beside her daughter. She tried to see her face, but it was too dark. It was difficult to know what to say when she couldn't see Lydia's face.

"Father went home alone," she whispered finally. "He didn't want to look for you. You've hurt him terribly and you must beg his pardon humbly."

Lydia laughed.

"You mustn't laugh," Caroline said. "No, perhaps you're right, because I'm so awkward with words. But what I want to say to you isn't funny. I've kept wanting to talk to you about it, but there was always something to do and I've never had a real chance. Maybe because I have a harder time with words in the daytime than when it's dark." She paused, rubbed her palms together and tilted her head so far to one side that it almost rested on her shoulder. "When we lived in Russia," she continued, "everything was so different. We always knew what the next day would bring; sometimes your father and I would sit down at the table of an evening and plan out the whole next year. Most of the time we were right, until one day everything changed. Formerly the difference was only that it was a little better or a little worse than we thought, that was all. But now, Lydia, it's death or life for us. If everyone goes his own way, we're done for. If everyone thinks this is a new land and the old things don't matter any more, we'll find ourselves starving some day."

She paused and waited for the girl to question her. When Lydia said nothing, she went on in a low voice:

"You think there's a gulf between you and all the rest of us. You think we don't understand you. Maybe you aren't so wrong. Maybe we really don't know enough about you. We may be to blame because we've worked sixteen hours a day and have been too tired afterwards to think about anything. Or maybe we didn't want to think about some things because we didn't see that it would do us any good." Again she paused. With her fingers she scratched up a lump of earth and held it toward Lydia. Her voice became clear and ringing. "But we do understand this," she said. "We understand the earth; we know about wheat and melons and corn and cows and oxen. And we understand the struggle for one's daily bread; we know that you can't do it alone; that there must be a community if you want to have butter on your bread." She took a deep breath and sat upright. "This is a wonderful country, but it's stubborn as a young colt. If you don't watch your step it'll kick you in the belly and knock you down for good. Or the drought will suck the blood out of your veins, or a flood will drown you or the hail kill you. Or your wheat will get the rust or the weevils will eat up your grain. Or your oxen will get foot-and-mouth disease and the cow will abort her calf and the hens die from fowl cholera and there you'll be, digging graves for your hens and your cows and your oxen and trying to bake

bread from an empty granary. You'll hitch yourself to the plough because you can't allow the land to lie fallow, and with your own hands you'll try to drag the harrow over the fields. You'll feel yourself getting weaker all the time. You'll take your gun and shoot crows to have something to eat, and when you have no cartridges left, you'll set traps for rabbits. You'll pick berries in the woods, but you won't be able to preserve them because you'll have no money to buy sugar, and at night you'll go to bed at dark because you don't want to use up the little kerosene you have left; you'll need it on wet days to start a fire. Morels and chanterelles are the last food the earth will give you freely, and then the winter comes. For hours you run over the frozen fields and look for some animal you can kill with your stick. Like a madman you race after a coyote's cry and follow the trail of a hare in the snow until you must give up because your hand is stiff and powerless. You take your axe, go to the brook and smash the ice and hang bait on your hook, hoping a fish will bite. When you come back, the water has frozen over and you have to chop through again, and if something has bitten, it's a minnow no bigger than your little finger."

Her voice softened again. "Aren't you cold, Lydia?" she asked.

"No, mother."

"Everything is covered with dew."

"Yes, but it doesn't matter."

"We ought to be careful."

"Please go on with what you were saying, mother."

"There isn't much more. Your nearest neighbour lives five miles away. You don't know him. Maybe you saw him once or twice at the market, but then you disliked him because he sold his melons so cheaply. You even had an argument with him about it. But now you're hungry. You can feel your stomach shrinking and your mind is clouded. You start out. No, you won't beg, you say to yourself. You'll ask him for a loan, strictly business. You'll pay him back with interest when your next harvest is in. And then you come to him and he says no. Then you begin to beg. You beg for a few loaves of bread or a bag of flour or a handful of cartridges so you can shoot rabbits and crows. He gives them to you and says, go to the devil. And you kiss his hand and hate him. I hope he croaks, you think to yourself, but you begin eating the bread before you reach home. With clammy fingers you dig pieces out of the loaf and stuff them into your mouth, and you throw stones after a squirrel that crosses your path. You don't notice that gradually you're changing from a man to an animal. In the neighbourhood people begin to be afraid of you, and you convince yourself that they're all heartless beasts who don't understand you. You imagine they're the hounds that are pursuing you; you feel as though they've hunted you into a closed circle, caught you in a trap. They want to destroy you, you tell yourself, though you've never done

anything to them, you're no more than a poor innocent who's never harmed any of them. Wolves, that's what they are, you tell yourself; all of them merciless, bloodthirsty wolves. Oh, yes, they give you charity when you beg; they don't let you starve; they help you all they can. But they lay their hands on their guns when you approach, and when the women are alone and see you coming in time, they lock the doors and won't let you into the house. And yet, what do you want of them? nothing, nothing at all. You just want them to let you alone. To give you something to eat until the next harvest, but not to interfere in your affairs. You want to be alone. You imagine you're marvellously strong when you're alone. All your misery is just stupid hard luck. Nothing to do with God, not at all. You yourself aren't to blame, certainly not. All nonsense, that stuff about one being too weak by himself—all their talk about community is nonsense. Old wives' tales. A lure so that they can get your labour cheaply; a trap to make you give yourself up and become like them. That is what you think."

Caroline stood up. She ran her hand through her daughter's hair. "Come now," she said awkwardly. "We've gabbed long enough and my legs are numb from kneeling in the grass."

Silently, Lydia climbed the hill at her side. The star Caroline had noted had disappeared behind the hill, but the upper rim of the meadow, outlined black against the sky, guided them.

When they came to the wagon trail, Lydia stood still.

"What must I say to Father?" she asked.

"You ought to know that yourself."

"But I don't know. I've done nothing to him that I should ask his pardon for. He gripped my arm and I defended myself. I'm not a child any longer, to be taken by the arm and dragged away."

"Let's go on," her mother said. She began walking. When she saw that Lydia was not following her, she turned around. "Can't you once say to him what you really feel, Lydia? Not what you've thought and considered and decided on, but simply what your heart tells you to say."

Lydia laughed mirthlessly. "What my heart tells me? Is anyone in this community allowed to have a heart? Was I allowed to have a heart in Topeka? Isn't having a heart a crime among you, or at least a misfortune? No, Mother, I can't ask his pardon. I can't."

They stood in the darkness a few paces apart. They did not see each other, but each heard every movement the other made. A frog croaked almost at their feet. Its thrumming note vanished suddenly when Lydia picked up a stone and threw it.

"Do as you please," Caroline said. She began walking again. She was so tired she could scarcely move. She had never talked so much in her life; her throat felt sore. She must get home. Let Lydia solve her own problem with her father.

She heard her daughter's footsteps behind her. Good that she was going home with her. If they stayed together, everything would be patched up in time. That alone was important—they must not part. If they parted, all was lost.

Martin Miller was reading his Bible when the women entered the room. He had folded his arms around the big book; in the lamplight the paper looked old and yellowed, and his worn hands were like ageing wood.

"Good evening, Martin," Caroline said, kissing him.

"Good evening, Caroline," he replied, without raising his head.

"Good evening, Father," Lydia said.

When he did not answer, she shrugged and went to the kitchen. She was hungry. She would eat and then go to sleep. She looked forward to her room and to her bed with its many pillows. There she would be alone. And when she buried her head in the pillows, no one could harm her. They were like a wall.

That was it, they were a wall, all around her.

Patricia Parker awoke when her husband came home. The room was pitch dark, but when she turned toward the door to the other room she saw a gleam of light through the crack.

"Albert," she called.

Lamp in hand, he entered.

"You're late," she said.

Parker placed the lamp carefully on the floor and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Hello, Silverheel," he said.

He bent over and kissed her. "You look as if you've slept well."

He gazed fondly at her. She had really changed little since Alma. She had the same strange eyes and full mouth, and the freckles on her nose and between her eyebrows. Perhaps her face had thinned a little.

"Did it take you so long to bring Miss Miller home?" she asked.

He shook his head. "She wouldn't let me bring her home. She ran away from me. I searched for her for a long time and finally caught a glimpse of her in the distance. I kept her in sight without going closer. Her parents were working on the other slope. They pretended they didn't see her, and when it got dark they went home with their hay-load."

"What did you do?"

Parker shrugged. "I said to myself, the devil take them. I waited till the girl crossed the brook and then I came home."

"I think you should have followed her until she was safe home. Don't you think so, Albert?"

"Maybe," he said, and kissed her again.

"They'll say you let the girl run around at night all alone," Patricia said, turning her head to one side.

"What's the difference?"

"There's no difference as long as it isn't true. But it is true."

Parker scratched his head. "I didn't want to leave you alone so long," he said. "And I was hungry. Starved. Like a wolf or a bear."

He looked mournfully at his wife.

"It's too bad," she said. "Up to now they've had to invent all their stories about us. That we belonged to a band of horse thieves who escaped from a posse in Texas, or that story about our murdering someone and burying him under this house, and that one about me being the mistress of the Bishop of Denver. Silly of you to get hungry, Albert." She smiled. "Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Oh."

"I've made a fire. A big one. We c'n have bacon and eggs."

Patricia shook her head. "We're the poorest farmers in the neighbourhood and we know least about farming, and we're the only ones that eat bacon and eggs."

"After the harvest we'll fill the stocking again."

"If there's anything to harvest."

Parker laughed confidently. He stood up and left the room to see to the fire. He lifted the round iron cover from the stove and filled the firebox with pieces of wood that he took from a basket.

"You make me laugh," he called out to Patricia. "We'll get at least thrity-five bushels an acre from our wheatfields, and twenty-five from the corn. At least. And we don't have anything more to buy. We've got all we need—cows and oxen and the horse and hay for the whole winter."

"Hay?" Patricia questioned, throwing her legs out of bed and sitting up.

"Oh, well, it's still standing, but if I want to I can go out to-morrow and start cutting it."

"I think you ought to, Albert," Patricia said. She slipped her feet into dainty red slippers. "I'd like to see something in the barn. You feel rich and safe when you know the animals are provided for and there's nothing more can happen to you. It's because of the baby too. Mainly because of the baby."

She stood up and smoothed her nightgown. Then she took her embroidered dressing-gown and threw it over her shoulders. She went to the mirror and arranged her hair. You wanted to keep yourself looking as well as possible. You mustn't let yourself go. It was bad enough having these fainting fits when there was work for you every minute.

She heard Albert setting the table in the adjoining toom, and she smelled the frying bacon. She knew she wouldn't be able to touch the

food. Maybe she'd drink a glass of milk and swallow a little lettuce and a few radishes.

"Are you coming?" Parker called.

His voice sounded far away, as though her ears were stuffed with cotton.

"Right away," she answered, supporting herself against the small table on which her toilet things stood. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt the perspiration start out on her forehead. She set her teeth. Then it was past and she went in to Albert.

He had placed a lamp on the table and set their white plates and the knives and forks properly. The frying pan stood in the middle; the fat was still simmering and the bubbles in the white of the egg moved like living bodies. There was milk in a big bluish-grey pitcher. When Patricia came in, Albert took the pitcher and filled their glasses. Then he divided the eggs and cut thick slices from a big round loaf. He sat down and began to eat.

Patricia sipped the milk.

"Are you going to mow the hay to-morrow, Albert?" she asked.

He shook his head. His mouth was full.

"I think you ought to," she said. With her fork she tried to cut a small piece from the outermost edge of the egg.

Parker swallowed the food in his mouth.

"The grass isn't high enough yet," he said. "It's different up here. Down in the valley everything ripens earlier. Why should we take the half when we can have the whole harvest in a few days?" He put a piece of bread in his mouth and talked while chewing. "I'll fill the loft for you, don't worry. We'll have hay right up to the roof. And what hay. Almost all of it clover and timothy. We won't know what to do with all the milk. The oxen will be lazy and fat and the horse will have a round belly and a shiny hide."

"Clara Bieber said they were starting to mow their hay to-morrow," Patricia interrupted. "She says this is the best time because afterwards there's all the other work to do. They've been farmers all their lives and that's what they've always done. They've been here for several years. I do wish you'd talk to her husband if you won't listen to me."

Parker got up and went to the big earthenware water jar in the corner.

"I have other work for two or three days," he said. "I want to drain the land down in the valley. I saw the Mennonites doing that to-day. They're good workers and they know what they're doing. It would be marvellous for vegetables." He sat down again. "Why aren't you eating?"

"Isn't it awfully far down to the brook?" Patricia asked.

"Sure. But it's no nearer for the Mennonites and they're doing it. Why aren't you eating, Patricia?"

"I can't. Tell me about this drainage idea."

"You ought to eat something, Silverheel. If you don't eat, the baby won't grow. God knows, we don't want a weak baby. Especially out here."

Patricia scarcely listened. She toyed with the bread he had sliced for her, uneasy with the feeling that he had not told her everything. There was something in his new plans he was concealing from her. She knew him well enough to know how he behaved when he had a secret. She was worried now. Not because he wouldn't tell her. Why shouldn't a man have his secrets? All men had them. They had to, because they were men. That wasn't what worried her, not at all. It was something else, something much more indefinite. Perhaps it had nothing to do with his irrigation plans. Something in the air, or in herself. Still, it might also be his secret. She couldn't possibly know unless he told her what it was like, this work he was planning.

She sipped milk and bit off a small piece of bread. "Just what is it like, Albert, this drainage system?" she asked.

Parker did not answer at once. Holding his bread between the tips of his fingers, he rubbed it around in the frying pan until he had sopped up the last of the grease. "It's simple as pie," he said, licking his greasy fingers. "There's the brook and along the brook is the land that belongs to me. It's a long, narrow tongue of land at the foot of the hill. Nothing grows there but weeds and a little grass that isn't worth cutting because I'd have to drag it all the way up the hill. Now imagine if I build a dam in the brook, and dig little trenches so that I can lead the water that piles up in front of the dam over our land, wherever I want it. That's along the edge of the slope, where it's so dry now that nothing grows there. You remember the place we once picked raspberries? The earth feels like velvet there. And the places with heather and the gnarled oaks and the bushes whose names I don't know. It's the most fertile soil you ever saw, because for ages the rain has been washing all the goodness in the earth down that slope." He paused and looked at Patricia.

"Is that all, Albert?" she asked.

He stood up and began clearing the table. "No," he said sullenly, "that isn't all." He carried the plates and pitcher to the corner of the room, where a basin stood on a wooden framework. From the kettle on the stove he poured hot water into the basin. "Besides all that it's perfectly sheltered," he said. "The hill breaks the wind and the sun sets your back on fire down there. It's fierce, really fierce. It goes right through you and the ground boils underfoot. It's warm ten or twelve inches under the surface." He put the plates in the basin and wiped them clean with a rag. His back was turned to his wife, and as he said these last words he began to whistle.

Patricia gazed steadily at him. Her fingers were kneading bread

crumbs into little balls, then rolling them out into long, serpentine shapes. There might be nothing more to it than what he was telling her, she thought. Perhaps her anxiety just came from her condition, a silly fear that she ought to fight and hide. She ought not make things harder for Albert than they already were. When the child in her womb pressed against her heart and took her breath away, that was something she had to settle with herself; she mustn't think it was some menace in the air. Some omen of disaster.

"I think you ought to go back to sleep," Parker said to her. He dried his hands on a bright-coloured dish-towel and looked affectionately at her.

"You mustn't pay any attention to me, Albert," she said softly, holding her hand toward him. "I'm just silly. An old woman who sees ghosts."

Parker put the towel away and took her hand between his two hands. "Come, Silverheel," he said, "you are being silly. Maybe you're right about the haying. Maybe I'll start to-morrow."

She shook her head. "I guess it can wait a few days," she said. "I think your idea about irrigating is marvellous. You oughtn't to wait with it, Albert. Otherwise you might change your mind, or you'll have other work and not get to it."

"If only I had someone to look after you when I'm away," he whispered, putting his arm around her. "I'm always worried that something might happen to you. Like what happened to-day. You don't know how scared I was. I thought I knew these things lasted only a few minutes. But to-day it was so awfully long. And you were so pale."

She put her hand to his lips. "Don't talk about that," she said. "I feel so silly and useless. I can't help you at all, can't do anything for you. I'm just a burden to you."

"Don't talk such nonsense," Parker said. He led her gently into the bedroom and sat down beside her on the bed. "You still do too much work. Maybe that's the reason for all these fainting spells. Maybe they come from kneeling too much in the garden and carrying around pails of water and baking bread and washing and God knows what else. We ought to have a hired man or a maid, somebody . . ."

"Oh, Albert," she interrupted, lying back on her pillow and folding her hands behind her head.

"I mean it," Parker said.

Patricia laughed. "And what about me?" she asked. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Rest up, and maybe take a walk in the fields now and then, or sew clothes for the baby. And I suppose you could cook a little."

He got up and stretched. His arms were remarkably long, the skin tan under a blond down, and his muscles like strands of hemp. When he

breathed his ribs showed through his shirt and his hips seemed narrower than they really were.

Patricia gazed at him through slitted eyes. How well she knew him. The warmth of his body was so familiar to her that she had merely to think of it to recall what it was like when he came to her. To revive the feeling, first of dizziness, then of intoxication and hunger and exuberant desire. She knew the muscles of his neck and his arms and legs, the bones and joints of his body, and the little brown mole on his back. She knew that the skin of his biceps was tense and nervous, of his hips silken, and of his shins rough and hairy as hide. It was a joy to her that she knew and that the knowledge was always with her, something that belonged to her and existed for her, something she could not and would not change.

He left the room. She knew he would take the lamp from the kitchen and go to the barn. There he would place the lamp on the board where the milk pails stood. Behind the stalls was the gutter where the droppings from the animals fell. He would open the trapdoor back of the gutter, take the hoe and pull the dung over till it fell into the pit below. Then he would take the currycomb and scrape off the dung that had become encrusted in the oxen's hide. He would fill their mangers with green feed, pat the hindquarters of the horse and the crops of the oxen, and in passing he would run his hand over the cows' flanks. Then he would fetch sawdust from a box and bed down the animals. And then he would lean against the wall under the lamp and fold his arms.

They belong to you, the oxen and the cows and the horse, Patricia thought. They stand in your barn, the barn you built with your own hands. They're warm beneath the roof of prairie grass that you cut yourself and bundled and piled in layers just like slate. They're strong, your animals, as strong as you are yourself. They're healthy and they have enough fodder and the cow gives sixteen to eighteen quarts a day, and you've already signed up for the threshing machine. It's wonderful, how much you've done, Albert. You did it, all by yourself. The cholera was still in your bones when you first walked across these fields. And it was the wrong time of year to begin. But you didn't want to wait. You were afraid of yourself. Afraid you might lose the money again and start digging gold or gambling or drinking. And you were right, Albert, so right. The earth is grateful and returns with interest whatever you've entrusted to it. We can sleep peacefully. We can afford to have a baby. We're safe now, over the hill. Safe. The potatoes are already little knobs and the corn ears are swelling, and if winter doesn't come too soon we'll even have wheat. And more hay than we need. And a warm house. A fire in the stove beside the cradle, so that the baby won't be cold. We're safe, sheltered. All of us, Albert, you and the baby and me, and everything that belongs to us. Everything, Albert . . .

When Parker returned from the barn, Patricia was sleeping soundly.

Her mouth was slightly open and her face smooth. Her right hand lay on her belly, she had pillowed her cheek on her left hand. Her breathing was almost inaudible. Parker undressed in the kitchen so as not to disturb her. When he had taken off all his clothes, he sat down on a box and propped his head in his hands. The front door was still open and he could see out into the night. The glow of the lamp cut a rectangle out of the darkness, and in the bright patch he could see clearly a few stones, with grass and weeds growing among them. A moth appeared suddenly and struck against the lamp chimney. It rebounded, and with fluttering wings began flying up and down the glass.

The sound of its wings was insistent and disquieting, the creature's stubbornness maddening. Its shadow was everywhere, on the floor, on the wall, on the table, and when the sound of fluttering wings stopped for a moment, Parker looked for the moth until he had found it. It disturbed him to know that the insect was in the room without his seeing it. It was like an invisible danger that made you sick at the pit of your stomach. Like something lurking in the dark for you, something you know is there, though you can see no more than the silhouette, something big, black and threatening. The sort of thing Patricia had premonitions of, that he himself feared.

Maybe it was a crazy idea to build a dam and take away the Mennonites' water just to lead over his own land the trickle the brook supplied in the summer. Yet didn't he have to do it? Mightn't something happen to his fields up here? Something might destroy them, hail or drought or fire, or anything. There was something in the air, no doubt about it. It might be just that everything had been going too well, too easily, without a fight. Maybe no one else had this obscure sense of danger. He should have asked the Mennonite girl about it. He must talk to Bieber. But even if the other farmers didn't sense anything, shouldn't he build the dam and dig the ditches? He must have a field situated away from the others. A reserve he could draw on if something happened. He had his wife and the coming baby to think of. What did he care about the Mennonites? They had been his enemies from the first. They had formed a solid front against him. None of them had given a damn about him. He could have died like a dog and none of them would have noticed. They were strong and industrious. They had the best land. They had machines and tools and all the hands they needed. They were giants against him. Giants who could not defend themselves if he took their water from the brook. The upper bank belonged to him. He had a title to it. He'd paid for it. It was his land and his right to irrigate his fields, just as much as it was their right—if they had the water. Tomorrow he would begin. Maybe he would never need it. Maybe the fields around the house would mature and he would reap and fill the bins and decide he'd been a fool, frightened by ghosts. Maybe.

He got up and turned down the lamp. Then he blew it out. He left the front door open. On tiptoe he walked across the bare floor. Patricia was sleeping peacefully. The light on her table smoked and flickered, and went out before he could blow it out. The wick glowed for a while. He must fill it to-morrow. And he must remember that they were almost out of kerosene. And they needed coffee. And a good hammer, and nails, and boards for the dam.

Quietly, he lay down beside the sleeping woman. He felt her hand groping for him. It was warm and tender. He turned to face her and took her head in his arm.

"Go back to sleep, Pat," he said.

"You're late, Albert," she whispered.

She kissed him and brushed her fingers through his hair. Her breasts pressed against his naked body and her feet against his cold legs. "Are you cold?" she asked.

"No."

"Are you angry with me?"

"Angry?"

"Because of what I said, to-night. About the hay."

"Silverheel!"

"Are you going to begin on the dam to-morrow?"

"I think so. Maybe I'll wait one day more. I may cut part of the meadow." He yawned. Then he drew her closer and kissed her.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Marvellous."

"And It?"

"Fine, I think."

They were silent, gazing into the darkness, and after a while they forgot that their bodies were touching. They grew sleepy and moved away from each other, settling into the best position for sleep.

"Maybe I'll go to see this man Bieber and talk to him to-morrow," Parker said before he fell asleep.

"Fine," Patricia whispered; "I'm glad."

She drew up her legs and the pillow rustled under her head. Then there was silence. Later came her even breathing, and then her faint snoring. A hoot owl cried out. The window frame became visible, and the moon rose.

From the mowing Heinrich Bieber could see anyone coming across the fields from far away.

"Someone's coming," he said to Clara.

"Where?" she asked.

"Just below the sun."

The woman lifted her hand to her eyes. "I don't see anything," she said.

Bieber released the handle of the scythe and pointed. "Way down there. Now he's between the corn and the potatoes."

"It's probably the horse trader."

"Him? He doesn't come on foot."

"No, that's true."

"And besides, he comes by the road."

"Yes, he does come by the road."

"Don't you see him yet?"

Clara shook her head. "Should I go home so that someone is with the baby?" she asked.

"If you think so."

"Don't you think it would be better?"

"Yes, it would be."

Clara laid her scythe on the ground. She walked across the stubble grass and through the potatoes and the vegetable garden. Her carriage was erect and she took long, even steps.

When she vanished inside the house, Bieber set to work again. The mowing wasn't much good this year. It looked as though field mice had gnawed it. Wild barley and yarrow and daisies had shot up, but the fine grass had grown slowly. It had been too dry. He would have done better to wait a few days more. Formerly he would certainly have done that. He would have laughed at anyone who was in such a hurry to cut his hay. But now he himself was one of those who couldn't wait. Better a bird in the hand . . .

His scythe sliced the grass just above the ground. It might have been worse. After all, it had looked utterly miserable. He wouldn't have given a cent for the whole meadow a while ago. Was on the point of throwing up the whole thing. This was the devil's land, he had thought. A paradise for ants and spiders. And for the dust. A waterless paradise. Here he'd go to the dogs, he had thought. Slowly but surely. And no one would notice. No one would know. No one would bury them. Gradually the wind would cover their bodies with dust. And that was all.

He paused in his work and looked for the stranger. He was close to the house now. He wore a big hat and his face was reddish, his shoulders broad. His legs were concealed by the wheatfield. He did not seem very big, and when he entered he doffed his hat. His hair was blond.

The man remained standing in the shadow of the door. He would talk with Clara. Maybe he wanted work. Probably someone who had gone to the dogs in this country. Hadn't been able to stand it. Some poor devil whose only possessions were his two hands. Sorry, my boy, we haven't anything for you. We're poor ourselves, even though we own more land than the Grand Duke of Hesse. No, we do it all ourselves. Sorry, not even just for food and shelter. No, no, no.

The man left the house, Clara following behind him. She had Michael

by the hand and was talking with the stranger as they walked toward him. Heinrich turned away. He must mow the meadow. He must get in the hay. He had no time. He didn't want to buy anything and he couldn't give work to anyone. That was clear enough.

"Heinrich, this is Mr. Parker," Clara said when the three came up to him.

Bieber turned his head. "Hello," he said.

"He's our neighbour. You know, the man . . ."

"Oh," Heinrich said, remembering. "I know."

He dropped the scythe and held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, he said.

"Proud to meet you, sir," Parker said, taking his hand.

"Is anything wrong with your wife?" Heinrich asked.

"No, no, she's fine. Thank you for asking. She's working in the garden again. She isn't really ill." He paused and looked at the meadow. "You're mowing already?"

"Yes, I just began to-day. It isn't too early. But it's poor, disgustingly poor. Still, better than nothing. What good is it if it doesn't dry out afterwards? If it rots in the field and turns brown or black?"

"Can't it dry out afterwards if it rains for a day or two?"

"Sure, it can. But look at the grass just above the ground. All green. Green and healthy. Like young grass. One night of rain and it loses half its goodness. And what if it doesn't rain one night, but forty nights?" He spat and scratched his head. "You see, it's like this," he went on. "We own this land and yet we don't own it. We're still scared to death. We're scared because we haven't any reserves. We do foolish things out of caution. We hear the fleas cough and the grass growing. When the wind doesn't blow for a few weeks, we imagine there's something in the air. When an owl hoots at night, we start up because we think it means someone's going to die, and when the woodworm taps in the wall we cross ourselves." He bent down for the scythe. He wanted to go on working. He had no time. He had to mow the meadow. He couldn't wait. "Yes, it's like that," he said, turning away. He reached out. Hissing, the blade cut through the grass, evenly nicking little semicircles out of the meadow.

"Yes, it's like that," Clara repeated his words. "That's the way it is." She looked at the boy, who had sat down on the ground and was taking the cut grass in his little hands and strewing it on his bare legs. He had Heinrich's round face, and he smiled when one spoke to him. He could talk little as yet, but he made himself understood, and that was the main thing.

"I wanted to ask something else," Parker said.

"Go ahead," Bieber encouraged him.

Parker pushed back his hat and wiped the sweat that had accumulated

under the hatband. "I want to build a dam down on my brook. I have a piece of land that would be marvellous if I gave it a little irrigation." He hesitated.

"Well?"

Clara had picked up her scythe and taken a few steps away. Then, sensing something in Parker's words, she turned again.

"It's above the Mennonite settlement," Parker said.

Bieber whistled through his teeth.

"But it's my land. I paid for it. It belongs to me."

He spoke rapidly, as though afraid to let Bieber interrupt him. "It's my right to irrigate my own land. Nobody can stop me from doing that. And it isn't my fault that the brook doesn't have enough water for all. If the Mennonites were in my place, they wouldn't worry about me. They hate me, anyway. They want me to go to the dogs. They hope I'll lose all I have and sell out to them. Sell out cheap. That's what they want, nothing less. Get me?"

Bieber shook his head. "I think you ought to talk with them before you begin."

"Talk with them!"

Bieber nodded. "The devil take property and title. It's a dirty business, cutting off anyone's water."

"But I need the water. Maybe everything depends on my having it. Maybe something'll happen to my land up above. Suppose there really is something in the air. Suppose it just comes down on us the way the cholera comes down on you. Out of a clear sky. While you're working. Or eating. Or drinking. Or sleeping."

"You ought to talk with them."

Parker laughed scornfully. "Even if I wanted to, I couldn't. I'm like a leper to them. A devil's imp that no Christian would sit down at the same table with."

"Yet you went to the Mennonites when you wanted help for Patricia," Clara said softly.

"Yes, but that was something else. And I tell you the old man would have liked to smash his daughter's skull for going with me. You should have seen his face. All twisted and contorted. The face of a devil."

Bieber shook his head. His eyes were narrow and stubborn, his speech deliberate. "Nevertheless, you ought to talk with them."

"Do you hear?" Clara asked.

"Yes, damn it, I hear."

"What are you going to do?"

Parker rubbed his forearm over his nose to wipe away the sweat.

"I hope the devil tears me to little pieces if I do it," he said. He cleared his throat, but his voice remained hoarse as he continued.

"A few months ago three Mennonites came to see me one morning. They looked like all the rest. I've forgotten the names of the other two. The third was this man Miller, the girl's father. When they came in, I asked them to sit down. 'We're not tired,' they said.

"'You've come a long way,' I said.

"'No, thanks,' they replied, shaking their heads.

"'Please do,' I repeated.

"'Let us not waste time with needless formalities,' they said. And I swear to you, nothing moved in their faces but their lips, and they looked over my head as they talked to me.

"Go to the devil, I thought, and sat down. I leaned back and asked them what they wanted. I felt all mixed up and my voice was unsteady. I lit a cigarette and wished I had some whisky.

"'We've come to buy part of your land,' one of them said.

"I thought they were talking to someone standing behind me and I looked around. When I saw there was no one, I turned again and asked, had I understood aright. They said yes, they wanted to buy my side of the brook. They'd pay cash for it. And they'd pay a reasonable price. After all, I couldn't cultivate it; I probably had enough to do up here. And they guessed I could always use cash.

"'I'm not selling,' I said. 'I'm proud of my farm and I'm not giving up a single acre of it. Just the opposite, I want to buy more land. Maybe you need money for a church or an altar or an organ or a priest. Suppose I buy land from you; you can use the money to hire a teacher and learn how to speak English correctly. And you can learn the customs of this country. And manners.'

"It was like pinching an ox by the horn. Their faces were expressionless and their voices didn't change.

"'So,' they said, 'then you don't want to sell.'

"'No!' I shouted. 'And now get the hell out, because I want to spare my wife the sight of you.'

"I was so mad I felt I was going to bust. I wanted them gone before Patricia came back. I didn't want her to see how I had betrayed her like a Judas. I didn't want my wife to know what a lousy crawling coward I'd been. A spineless yellow dog. Letting these bastards come into my house and refuse to sit down. Not even asking those glass-eyed dopes why they didn't sit down. Me, sitting back and smoking cigarettes as if I didn't know they wouldn't sit down because they were thinking my wife was a whore. As if I didn't understand what it meant when they refused to sit at my table, didn't know what they meant when they said they weren't tired. I ought to get up and knock their blocks off.

"Just as I was thinking that I heard Patricia coming toward the house. She was humming some tune; she must have been almost at the door. I got up. If we were all standing, it would look as though we had

just finished talking. I pointed to the door and spat out my cigarette butt. 'Get out of here,' I said. 'Get the hell out of here.'

"They left. They didn't even nod to Patricia when they passed her. When I saw that I wanted to run after them and smash their teeth out. But Patricia laughed at me and held me back, and as a matter of fact I wasn't sorry because I have a wife to care for, and a cow and oxen, and who would take care of them all if they broke my head? Maybe that was what they were hoping for. Then they would have got the bank of the brook, and the fields and the house besides. Maybe I'd spoiled their little plan.

"I've never told Patricia the whole story. We never talked about it again. We're expecting a baby. We think it will be a boy and we know we're going to be happy. Maybe we've been too lucky. And we're afraid something may happen. That's the only reason I want to build the dam. The only reason. As God is my witness, that's the only reason."

He paused distractedly. After a while he asked, "Do you still think I ought to talk with the Mennonites?"

Bieber lowered his gaze. He wanted to answer honestly. To consider, understand, see the whole picture. It wasn't a simple matter of yes and no, right and wrong. Something between. Perhaps he himself would not have sat down at the woman's table. It was a lousy business when a man married a woman like that. After all, everybody knew what the Parker woman was. The kind any man could have for the asking, if he had the money. Like those they kept in the little house near the city wall in Lich, where a red lantern burned at night. All very well if Clara helped her when she was sick. That was another story. When people needed help, you gave it. That was all there was to it. And maybe he would have sat down. After all, now she was Parker's wife and a farmer woman like any other.

He gazed at his child, who was still playing on the grass and murmuring softly to himself. He must answer the man. He couldn't hold his peace forever. It was all wrong, the things he was thinking. Wrong because that wasn't the question. You just didn't take away other people's water without saying anything. A man had to try to get on with others. Never knew when you'd be up against it yourself. How could you know what the others would have done in the same situation? Maybe they wouldn't have asked, maybe they would have insisted on their rights and their title. But you didn't know. There was no way to know.

Bieber raised his head. "You must speak with them," he said. "In spite of everything, you must speak with them."

He began cutting the grass again. Clara went to the other side of the mowing, and for a while Parker was alone with the child.

He sat down on the mown grass. Michael laughed happily when he

saw that the big man was coming to him. He slid toward Parker and held out a clump of grass, saying "Da." When Parker did not move, he opened his hand to let the grass fall on the man's leg. The last few blades clung to his damp palm. He crooked and stretched his fingers until they fell, and all the while he reiterated, "Da."

After a while Parker recalled that he had his meadow to mow, the dam to build, and the cow to milk. And that Patricia was waiting for him. It was a free country; why should he ask anyone's permission? The devil take the man's advice; he was within his rights.

And so he decided to build his dam and ask permission of no one. He would take the water for himself, even if the Mennonites' land was dry. He would make his soil fertile, even if the others starved. He might have to guard his property with his rifle. Well, then he would. They would hate him. Let them hate him.

It was nearly noon when he came down into the valley.

Patricia had not been home when he went to fetch the pickaxe and spade. He had waited for a while. He had gone to the door and looked around. But he had no time to hunt for her. It wasn't easy, finding someone on a hundred and fifty acres of land. Especially when the corn and the grass were so high and all the bushes were thick with leaves. He had lost too much time already; he must hurry.

He had scribbled a few lines with chalk on the table. That would do. It wasn't his fault that he couldn't talk with her and would have to take this final step alone. No, it wasn't his fault. He had done all he could. He had intended to tell her everything. But she wasn't there, was nowhere in sight. It was fated that he should not speak to her. Well, let it be.

It was noon now, and he stood on the upper bank of the brook. First he must remove the stones. They were heavy and hot from the sun. Many of them were rooted in the earth. They gave when he shook them. They were loose like bad teeth. But still firm in the ground. He couldn't pull them out, or roll them to the side.

He took up the spade and dug around the stones. He hacked away at the blackberry bushes, dug out their roots. He cut away the fern and tore up the heather with his bare hands. He worked the point of the pickaxe under the stones and tugged on the handle, levering the stones out of their beds. He worked carefully, stopping when the wood began to groan. He must not break the handle.

Many stones were stronger than he. Well, they would have to remain. There was nothing to do about them. With the oxen he could draw them out, of course. But the oxen would never make it down this hill. Not even a horse would. A mule would have a hard time of it.

He cursed at the stumps of trees he encountered. He had never noticed

them before. Now they came to light when he dug the spade into a small mound. Most of them were mouldy and soft as tinder. The steel edge of the spade ground through them.

But some were still hard. These had to be dug out and freed from their roots. He should have brought an axe or a saw. But he had only the pickaxe, which did not cut. He could only crush the wood with it, crush and split it into fibres. Then he had to break the fibres with the spade, one by one. Hammering away, always at the same spot, driving the spade a little deeper each time into the gash he had made. The devil of a job.

Then the stumps were free. They looked like polyps with most of their tentacles lopped off. They were heavy, too heavy to lift. He would have to split them with wedges and a sledge hammer. To-morrow. My God, how could he ever do it all alone? Wasn't it too much for one man? And this was only the beginning. Late afternoon already and nothing to show for all his work.

He began digging. It was good to feel the spade slide down into the earth. The surface was hard and a tangle of small roots; it took strength to penetrate. He had to stamp hard with his foot to drive the spade in. But below the upper layer it went smoothly. The ground was soft as butter.

The earth was crumbly. It reminded him of an almond cake he had once eaten. How long ago that was. The cake had been too sweet and had made him thirsty.

The earth his spade turned up was brown. Deeper down it became grey. As the heap of earth grew, the individual lumps disappeared and it became a dusty surface. Here and there a buried blade of grass showed. Ants scurried in all directions, searching for destroyed tunnels, and pill bugs rolled into tight little balls.

When he straightened up to wipe the sweat from his face, he saw Lydia Miller coming down the valley. She was still far away, but he recognized her by her gait. She moved slowly and stiffly, with lowered head. She was wearing a straw hat with a broad brim and was walking dreamily, as though she had no idea where he was and had not yet seen him.

He stood motionless, his handkerchief crumpled in his hand. For the space of seconds he did not breathe. She was clearly in view. He could see her neck and shoulders and arms and breasts. Now and then through the bushes a bright patch of skirt showed.

Now she was like a shadow. Not the shadow of a cloud as it mantles the sun, or of a hand shading a candle. Something different, something strange and disquieting. A shadow that needed no light; a shadow that had its own life. That frightened the wits out of you, made you want to run and hide or crawl into the ground to escape it.

Lydia stumbled over a stone. Parker dropped the hand that had been

holding the handkerchief before his face. He smiled at himself. It must be the heat. Maybe he had fallen asleep standing and had dreamed.

He bent down and picked up a piece of earth. He crushed it between his fingers. It hissed faintly and crumbs of dirt sprayed out on all sides. Some of the earth fell on the palm of his hand. It itched. He clenched his hand. It felt hard and calloused and strong, magnificently real and alive.

"Hey, there," he called.

The girl stood still and looked up. She had seen him long before their eyes met.

Slowly she came toward him along the bank of the brook. Parker gazed at his hands, which he had folded over the handle of the spade.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Good afternoon, Miss Miller," he said. He gazed at her stony, expressionless face.

"Good afternoon." She paused. "What are you doing?"

"Digging."

"What for?"

"Isn't that my business?"

"What for?"

"Because I enjoy it."

"Because you want to build a dam?"

"Maybe."

"And take the water away from us?"

"No."

"Because you want to hurt us?"

"No."

"Because you hate us. Because you're like all the others in this country. You can't stand seeing us succeed. You think we're intruders, strangers who have no business here. You hate us because we work harder than you do, because we know more and don't get drunk. Because we think war is a sin and don't kill each other. And because we live by God's commandments. That's why you're building a dam. Your own land isn't enough for you; you have to take our water away. You'd rather let your hay rot and dig in useless ground. So that you can make trouble for us, make our struggle harder."

She had spoken tonelessly. At times her breathing had been louder than her voice. Her eyes had remained fixed on his hands; her body had not moved. Her shoulders were still slightly stooped, her arms dangling, her fingers crooked tensely, her feet close together, flat on the ground.

Parker had listened with bated breath. When she fell silent, he waited a moment before he breathed deeply of the fresh air. Then he laughed hard and good-naturedly, as though from pure merriment.

"Marvellous," he said, spitting into his hands. He gripped the spade and braced his foot against the steel. "Go on," he grinned, driving the spade viciously into the ground. "Don't let me disturb you." He pressed down on the handle, raised the lump of earth and let it slide off the side of the spade.

Lydia came a step closer to him. "It's my father who uses this water," she said. "Won't you think of that, for my sake?"

"Your father?" Parker questioned, driving the spade in once more. He struck a stone; there was a scraping sound. He withdrew the blade and began again. "For your sake? Why for your sake?"

"Oh, I just thought . . ." She had come closer to him.

"Because of yesterday?"

"Maybe."

"Because you did something out of ordinary human decency?"

"Maybe." She was standing close to him now. She saw the graceful play of his muscles as he bent down and she smelled the sweat in his clothes. He hated her, she thought. They all hated her. Everyone. Her own people—father, mother, the Mennonites. Even Lopez Casseiro in Topeka had hated her: He, too. He most of all. O God in heaven. Why had she spoken for the Mennonites? She must be crazy. She was lost now. She wasn't strong at all. She was alone, utterly alone. And there was no wall around her, no wall to protect her. Nothing belonged to her. Nothing, nothing. She was the most alien of the aliens.

She clenched her fists. She heard the spade grinding into the earth. There was a haze over her eyes, and her mouth was dry. She must swallow. A trickle of sweat ran along her nose. Her hands were wet. Her breasts clung to her blouse. She was naked. Miserable. Ridiculous.

When Parker looked up, she struck. His face, his head, his shoulders, his arms. Again and again she struck, with all her might. As brutally, ruthlessly as she could. She struck with her knuckles, with her forearms, with the nerves and skin and muscles and bones of her whole body.

Parker finally succeeded in grasping her wrists. He had been so surprised by her first blow that he had not stirred. A second blow struck him under the eye, and a third cut his upper lip before he ducked and held his hands up to protect his head. Then he had straightened up and caught her flailing fists. His eye smarted and he knew his lip was bleeding. He stretched his arms as far apart as possible and closed his hands tightly around her wrists. Her body touched his. Buttons had snapped off her dress and he could see the base of her breasts. She leaned her head to one side and shut her eyes. Her lips were slightly parted. It seemed almost that she was smiling. As though a loving hand was caressing her.

When Parker released her wrists, her arms fell quickly. She swayed.

In a moment her knees would give and she would fall forward. Her face would strike the heaps of earth and her head lie among the grey-brown clods.

She took a short step forward and recovered her balance. She opened her eyes. Before her stood Parker, wiping the blood from his lips. The blood stained the handkerchief brown. It welled in bright drops from a wound in the centre of his lower lip. There was blood on his shirt. It must still be wet, for the colour was light. When it dried it would turn dark, almost black.

She wondered why Parker said nothing. He still held the handkerchief in his big hand and looked at her. One half of his face was swollen. How absurd he looked. His skin was taut from cheekbones to nose. It was raw and inflamed in the places where her knuckles had struck. It had a greasy sheen. It would hurt him whenever he laughed. His face was all crooked. The whore he lived with would pity him.

Suddenly she heard his voice. "Get out of here," he said.

She nodded. "I'm going."

She turned. He saw her long, thin back and her too-high shoulders. He saw the coarse bones of her hips through her dress. And he saw her broad feet in their crude shoes.

"Scarecrow," he said under his breath.

She stood still, without turning around.

"Dried-up old maid."

She bowed her head.

"What a heroine you are. They'll laugh till their sides ache in Gnadenau, when you tell them the story. They'll say you've done noble work. Hail, the warrior of God! they'll cry. Our sister who fought the devil with her bare hands. They'll shout hallelujah at services. You have beaten the stranger, the outcast, the leper whose house is unclean. The son of a bitch who lives with a whore."

He paused for breath and rubbed his forehead with the handkerchief. He was glad she was listening, standing there with her head drawn into her shoulders. It hurt, what he was saying. Damn bitch, it hurt.

He laughed. The side of his face was stiff. He brushed his hand over the swelling.

"Your fists are hard," he continued. "You're strong as an ox. But don't think any man will go to bed with you on account of that. They'll be afraid of you. You've fought with a man, beaten him up. Sure, it was a stranger. Sure, he was the devil incarnate. But still a man. The men will hide. They'll avoid you. They won't go near you. You'll be alone. More and more alone. More and more hopeless."

That was good. He must be on the right track. She had shuddered when he spoke of her being alone. That hit the mark. She seemed smaller. Stooped like an old grandmother. No mercy, Parker. Give it to

her. Give it to her so she'll never forget. So that she'll drag it around with her as long as she lives. She'll think of it when she wakes up in the morning and when she goes to bed at night. She can't defend herself. You have her now. Punish her. You can take your revenge. How sweet, how sweet. Better than whisky because it leaves your mind clear. It eases you, releases you. Now you can pay them back, the damned Mennonites. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Lydia stood and waited, paralysed. Her muscles hung slack, as though scarcely attached to her bones. All her sinews sagged. She held herself upright because her feet were broad, because her body was balanced on her widespread legs, and because nothing external disturbed her balance.

Only her senses were alive. She smelled the warmth of the earth and the pungent fragrance of the heather. She saw the shadows of the grass and the tiny fronds of the moss on the stones. She heard a cricket chirping, and she heard Parker's breath.

She began to pray silently. Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

She knew it was senseless. The man behind her would go on. He would say everything. He was well on the way. He had undressed her, stripped her naked. He had lamed her muscles. But not her hearing. Not her brain. Dear Father in heaven, why not her brain?

Why was he not speaking? Did he want to torment her with suspense? Was he gloating over her fear, her nakedness, her ugliness?

Why was he still silent, when it was so easy for him to break her completely? When he need say only a few more words. Words he knew, syllables he had already half spoken.

You will be lonely and abandoned, Lydia, he could say. No one will open his heart to you. No one will smile when you appear. No loving hand will stroke you when you are feverish, and no one will console you in your last hour. Wherever you go there will be coldness, and in broad daylight you will be surrounded by darkness.

A curse will hang like a millstone around your skinny neck. A curse that will not leave you until the devil comes to fetch you. In your heart you will store warmth and kindness and sympathy. You will want to give these things to others. You will want to be warm and kind and sympathetic with children, so that they will smile at you; and with the poor, so that they will look upon you with gratitude. You would give all the warmth that is in you for a single clasp of the hand and a single friendly word.

But you will not be able. You will try to break open your petrified heart. With clawing fingers you will dig into yourself as a mole digs into the earth. With your teeth you will gnaw into yourself, and with your tears you will try to soften your heart. But your fingernails will break

and your teeth rot and your tears will dry, and the warmth will remain locked in your heart. It will be like the fiery core of the earth which cannot burst through the outer shell. Your gentlest smile will be seen as a horrid leer, and your most loving words heard as poison and malice.

That is your curse, Lydia.

Parker saw the girl's shoulders quivering. Perhaps she was crying. Maybe he'd better shut up. Enough, she was crying. No reason to kick her when she was down. God knows, she might have had trouble with the Mennonites on his account. He hadn't thought of that. He should have asked her.

He cleared his throat and spat.

Then she began to run.

She held her head forward and her hands over her ears. She ran awkwardly, and her raised arms made her look more comical.

"Hey, there," Parker called after her.

But she did not turn. She stumbled and fell over the rocks. She pulled herself up. She fell again among the blackberry bushes, and again by the hazel-nut shrubs. The last Parker saw of her was her straggly hair high above the bushes for a moment, as she turned the bend of the valley and disappeared.

As though a pack of wolves are after her, he thought. He looked up at the sun. It was large and yellow; it would soon be dusk. He had wasted a hell of a lot of time. He sighed and felt his swollen face. Then he picked up the spade. He pressed his foot against the blade. The earth cried out, and slowly the new land arose out of the ancient soil.

Four and twenty days and four and twenty nights the stillness of the air prevailed, and when the morning of the twenty-fifth day dawned, God sent the wind.

Lo and behold! The dust on the peaks of the Rocky Mountains sprang to life, and the blades of grass among the stones awoke. The fields of the plateaus rustled and a splashing arose on the shores of lakes. In the valleys the wind crackled in the straw of roofs and shivered among the beams of stables.

Almost at the very same hour the wind came unto the lands of the south and unto the lands of the north, to Idaho and to Nevada, to Washington and to Utah.

The roar of its passage awakened the creatures of the Lord. The mountain goats among the precipices and the elk on the gentler slopes, the bears in the thickets, the partridges in the trees, the buffalo on the plains and the mice in their holes in the earth.

The last to awaken were the swarms of locusts, for the dew of night still lay heavy on their wings. They hung in thick clusters on the plants of the fields and in the garden beds, and their name was legion.

When the wind and the sun had ministered to them, drying their wings and warming their bodies, they rose into the air.

And they became like a cloud, ascending ever higher into the azure sky until they mingled with it and became one with it.

But the Lord watched over them and instructed them in their way.

And He joined the swarm from Idaho to the swarm from Montana, and to these He joined the swarm from Colorado, and out of the three He formed an ever-thickening cloud that rolled through the air like a monstrous ball.

And He took from them the shadows of their bodies and the stench of their mouths and the noise of their wings, and made them invisible and intangible.

He made the air dry and preserved them from crows and larks, and in the night He guarded them against prairie fires.

For this was His will.

And so the mighty swarm drew nigh the land of Kansas, where in the valley of Gnadenu the Mennonites dwelt, and where on the heights were Heinrich Bieber and Albert Parker, with their kine and their oxen.

It drew ever nearer, and never once did it swerve from its path. It rested when darkness fell, but it did not feed to the fullness of its greed.

Nevertheless, it grew not weaker, but increased in strength like a ravenous dragon. For it heaped the hunger of yesterday upon the hunger of to-day and it stored up the gluttony of all its days. It transformed all the desires of its body into the single desire of its bowels, and nought remained in its life but the lust for food.

And the tidings of the coming of the swarm went over the earth. Where it rested at night, men trembled. The devout fell upon their knees, lifted their hands to heaven and besought God to spare them, and the unbelievers swore grave oaths. The swarm devoured one man's garden and spared his wheat, destroyed another man's meadow and spared his potatoes, and always it arrived at evening and vanished with the morning.

"Praised be the Lord," cried the devout, when the swarm passed on; and the unbelievers mocked them and said, "Just a miserable flock of grasshoppers."

But the Lord was not wroth with them, for they were like unto blind men who speak of colours. He lent renewed vigour to the swarm, and because the vast cloud seemed still too small to Him, He joined to it the locusts of Nevada and Wyoming.

Bow thy head, unhappy farmer of the land of Kansas; bow down and bend thy knee. Draw wife and child beside thee on the earth and command them to pray with all the fervour of their hearts. But speak thou speedily the Amen and let the prayer be brief upon thy lips, for thy time must be given to the struggle.

Hearken, tiller of the soil, the day has come when the chaff shall be divided from the wheat and the weak from the strong. Hearken to the voice of the Lord and gather up the strength of thy heart. And lend thy hand to thy neighbour; give him of thy strength as he shall give to thee of his.

Be thou not misled by the craven who soon despair and bow their heads, nor by those who will seek to lure thee from thy land. Let not thy purpose flag before the weeping of thy wife and the hunger of thy children. Hold firmly to the land that is thine, man of the soil, and to the earth whereon thou standest.

For this is the will of the Lord, and His will be done, now and tomorrow and forever. Amen.

The wind did not come to the valley of Gnadenau until the day had dawned fully. It whipped up the dust between houses, and the Mennonites who sat in Martin Miller's parlour turned their heads.

It was Sunday. They had tended their animals, and afterward they had put on their Sabbath suits, with long coats that buttoned up to the neck. They were discussing community affairs. Later they would hold divine services.

The men shifted uneasily in their places. The wind was welcome. Perhaps it would rain. Whoever had not done his haying had best hurry.

They glanced surreptitiously at Miller, who sat at the head of the table. His face was pale, his eyes red-rimmed. The night before, when most of the settlers were already a-bed he had sent a messenger from house to house. Brother Miller requested that the council meeting take place at his home.

The men had nodded sleepily and exchanged a few words with their wives. Then they had fallen asleep and thought no more of the matter until the following morning.

They arrived punctually at Miller's house and began the meeting as though nothing unusual was taking place. They asked no questions, and their voices remained friendly and cool. The scene was the same as on any Sunday morning. The Bible lay on the table, the green-and-golden clock in the corner ticked, the men spoke of seedings and harvests.

But now the conference was over. They were waiting. They clasped their big hands on the table and stretched their feet forward or to one side. Then they sat motionless, and there was no sound in the room but the ticking of the clock and the plucking of the wind in the straw roof.

Miller drew the Bible toward him. He did not open it, but he placed his hands on the book. It was as if he wished to have some firm place to support his uncertain fingers.

"I must ask the brethren to pardon me," he whispered. "I had a particular reason for asking that this meeting be held under my roof."

He paused. The men stared into space. One of theirs was in distress;

they would not torment him or humiliate him by looking into his face. It would be easier for him to speak if they lowered their eyes. Let him speak as if alone, knowing only in his heart that they were there, that they were listening to him and would help him, as he would help them in their sorrow.

"Something frightful has happened," Miller went on. His knuckles whitened as he clenched his hands. "Something so dreadful that it is almost impossible for me to tell you, my brethren. The Lord has laid a burden upon me that I fear may be too heavy for me to bear. He has put me to a test that may prove too stern for my strength."

Again he paused. The joints of his fingers cracked.

After a while he went on: "Something has happened to Lydia." He bowed his head until his forehead touched the Bible.

For a while the men sat still. Then one who sat beside him took his hand from the table and placed it on Miller's shoulder. He was an old man with a straggly beard. Joseph Reimer was his name. A few years ago he had lost his son. Since then he lived alone with his wife; he had become taciturn, retired and very wise; his rare speeches carried weight in the community.

"Go on, Brother Martin," he said. "Imagine that no one is listening to you. That you are speaking to yourself in the darkness of your room, forming your thoughts into words." He paused. When Miller still did not stir, he leaned forward and whispered, "Or would you prefer to tell it to one of us alone?"

Miller sat erect. He brushed his sleeve over his eyes and shook his head. "No," he said. "It concerns all who are here. It concerns everyone in the village. My God, yes, everyone." He paused again and moistened his lips.

"It was after ten when Lydia came home last night. The wind had not yet come up and one could hear a person coming from far away. My wife was still in the barn. The water pails were rattling, the clock ticking. Suddenly I heard a sound like a drunkard's walking. The door was open. Someone seemed to be stumbling from one side of the street to the other. Running fast and then standing still; I could hear his breathing. He must have been running. He seemed to gasp for air. He panted like a dog that's had a hard run. Like a hunted animal. And like nothing I'd ever heard before.

"I couldn't move. I sat numbed here, on this bench. I had opened the Bible to the Book of Job. I held my breath. I'll call Caroline, I thought. And then Lydia came in."

He paused, shaking his head. "At first I scarcely recognized her," he said. "No, it can't be she, I thought. She isn't so pale. She doesn't look like that. She couldn't have eyes so filled with terror. And wear clothes so tattered. My daughter could not be so shameless as to leave the buttons of her blouse open when she comes before her father,

"I didn't come to my senses until she began to speak to me. She told me everything. I remember every word as though she had just this minute spoken. I'll remember them till the end of my life. I can't repeat what she said. But I'll never forget it. Never. Not if I grow as old as Methuselah."

He propped his head in his hands. "Dear God in heaven," he whispered, "why hast Thou let me live to suffer this? Why didst Thou not take me to Thyself when we were still in the old country? Why hast Thou led me graciously from our old home to a new one, if it was not to be for good? If it was not to be that I should end my humble life in peace?"

The wind had grown stronger. It whipped fiercely through the cornfields. A window began to rattle. The door moved slightly and the hinges groaned.

"Who was the dog?" asked a man who sat in the corner of the room because there had been no place for him at the table. He sat on a low bench and leaned his back against the wall. He had narrow eyes deep-sunk behind prominent cheekbones, a broad nose and bristly hair that grew out of his head like spines. He was Emil Schermer, the youngest in the council.

Old Reimer turned toward him. He gazed at him with raised eyebrows and pursed lips. There was so much fine scorn and kindly superiority in his face that Schermer lowered his head and fell silent. Schermer could not understand. Why were they still sitting so calmly here? The thing to do was to fetch the brute and pay him back. Take an ox pizzle and beat him within an inch of his life. When he came to, give him a kick in the arse and chase him out of the village. That was all there was to it.

He stood up. He was so tall that he always stooped slightly to avoid cracking his skull against low ceilings and door frames. He stepped to the table and stared at the silent men. Then he shook his head.

"Who is the fellow?" he asked.

When Miller did not reply, he turned to the others.

"Aren't you going to ask him?"

"Give him time," Reimer said.

"Why?"

"Because it is difficult, brother."

"Sure, sure. But we must know. We ought to bind the swine to a tree and beat him until he can't stand. And then . . ."

Miller raised his head.

"What are you saying, Brother Emil?" he asked.

The man looked at him. His eyes were wide; his sparse hair hung in strands over his forehead. His lips were quivering as though he had been seized by convulsions. He groaned. The pitch of the groan began high and became lower and lower, until it sounded finally like a choked sob.

Then he spoke. "No," he said. "No, no. You don't understand. He's not one of our people. It's much worse, more horrible, more inhuman, more diabolic."

He took a deep breath. He drew the air in through half-clenched teeth, so that it whistled in passage. He did not stop until his lungs were full almost to bursting. His chest swelled under his coat and his shoulders straightened.

"Parker!" he shouted suddenly. "Parker, Parker! The swine was Parker!"

His outcry was like the roar of a jungle beast. It would frighten the women of the village and the children on the street. They would look around and listen for the cry to be repeated. They would wonder whether it had been a coyote, or whether it was some uncanny thing from out the blue sky, some portent of evil. But the wind blew and the days were no longer silent; it was a Sunday like all other Sundays. And finally they would conclude that it had been nothing but the call of some bird of prey.

There was dead silence in Miller's parlour. Schermer had sat down again on his box by the wall and the other men, who for a moment had been startled, had regained control over their features.

"Good," Schermer said. "I'm glad it wasn't one of our men. It wouldn't have been easy. I myself would have been afraid to punish him. Maybe I couldn't have done it. But as it is . . . That makes everything easier."

"You ought to have more sense," Reimer said.

"What do you mean?"

"Because, brother, we will do none of the things you are thinking. We will send a messenger to the sheriff with a letter describing what has happened."

"And then?"

"That's all."

"You mean we won't take flails and pitchforks and torches. We won't go down to the brook and up the other side until we come to Parker's house. We won't tear him out of the arms of his whore and tie his arms around a tree. We won't . . ."

"No."

"And we will tolerate it when the people in Atchison point their fingers at us and laugh till their sides hurt. They'll pinch the cheeks of our women when they meet them, because they'll know it's safe; they'll make passes at our girls because all it can cost them is a fine of a dollar or nothing at all."

"He's right," several of the others said.

Reimer shook his head. "You men are strong," he said. "You have hard bones and muscles of iron. But you have short memories. Perhaps

you are too young. Perhaps, too, the wildness of this land has turned your heads and made you like drunkards who forget the way home. Only God knows why He has obscured your insight. Why He has blinded your eyes to the fact that your strength is your right. That you cannot descend to the level of those who fight with flails and pitchforks and torches. You must remain on the heights that we have climbed quietly and without fame. Without fame because our path is not marked by the crosses of men slain by violence. Because we endure it when people laugh at us; we suffer their mockery without reaching for our knives. Without fame, but blessed. Blessed by the fruits of our labour and the calm of our hearts, by the clarity of our minds and the peace of our consciences—blessed by the restful quietness of our last hour, when the Lord calls us to Himself."

He fell silent.

"Well?" someone asked.

They looked at Miller, who had once again clasped his hands over the Bible. His face was a stony mask; no one knew whether he had been listening to the conversation. Reimer bent toward him.

"I will write the letter to the sheriff," he said. "I'll go to him myself, if the brethren are agreed. But I would like to hear your daughter's story from her own lips. You understand, Martin?"

Miller nodded. "She's in the bedroom with her mother," he said.

Reimer got up. As he was leaving the room, Schermer blocked his way. The room was dim because the sun could shine in only through the two narrow windows. The men turned their heads.

"What's the matter?" Reimer asked.

"I demand a vote."

"That is your privilege, brother."

"I want the whole community to vote."

"We are the representatives of the community."

"No, not in such a matter."

"In all matters."

"Not in this one."

"Why not?"

"Because, Reimer, you cannot be representative in a matter you don't understand. You are too old. And this is not Russia. In this country we can't shut ourselves away from the others. We have no right to. We're here to build up something new, together with the others. And because of that we have to rid ourselves of those who don't belong here, who are a menace."

Reimer turned. "Do the brethren have the same opinion?" he asked.

Two or three said yes, all the others no.

"Let me pass," Reimer said.

"No."

There was a silence. The clock ticked slowly, regularly. Children passed in the street outside, loudly babbling.

Then Miller spoke. His voice sounded strange and remote, and in the semi-darkness of the room his lips could not be seen to move.

"This has happened," he said, "and it cannot be altered. It has come because God has willed it. You have a crooked back from working. You have calluses on your hands and sweat in your clothes from the labours of your day. You eat dry bread and drink sour milk to save a few pennies. The day is too short because it contains only sixteen hours, and not even during the eight hours of the night do you have peace. You worry about the seed in the ground and the corn on the ear. You reckon out whether you have enough for another cow, and you know that your wife is not sleeping because her thoughts are the same. And you know that next door your neighbour has the same worries. And his next-door neighbour, and all the rest of the community. You aren't alone. You are pious and your road is straight and the Lord is with you. God is with you, and your neighbours. And because you aren't alone, nothing is lost, as long as you are not alone."

His voice had sunk to a whisper. Slowly he placed his hands over his eyes. They were big hands; they covered his whole face. They were wrinkled and bony, and the nails were broken.

Silently the men left the room. They walked on tiptoe, with lowered eyes. It was not proper to remain while one of their own wept.

After services Reimer went home. He held his hands clasped behind his back and let the wind propel him up the street.

For several years Reimer had been the only settler in the valley, and he had never dared hope that some day there would be a Mennonite community around his farm. Then the committee had come and on his advice picked this good land for the new settlers.

At first his home had been an adobe hut like all the rest; but now it was a proper wooden house with a slate roof. In his garden flowers grew in perfectly straight rows, and all around was a hedge of mulberry bushes. Apricot trees that had already borne fruit stood in the vegetable garden. In his barn were six animals, not counting the calves and the goats. The piles of straw stood like pyramids to the right and left of the courtyard. These were from the year before. He had not used all he had stored, and soon there would be more, if God willed.

Before he entered he stood still and looked around. The wind came from the west, but the sky was clear and cloudless. He still had some hay in the fields. He would bring it in to-morrow morning. He glanced at the hayloft. A few boards were loose; he would have to make repairs.

He opened the front door. Some time ago he had sacrificed his parlour to an idea. He was raising silkworms. Many years ago he had done that

in the Crimea; why should it not be possible in Kansas also? He had placed enormous tables in the parlour and increased the planting of his mulberry hedge. It was hard to keep up with the creatures' appetite. Often he was concerned that he would not have enough mulberry leaves. But he had managed, and a few weeks ago his wife had spun the first silk threads on her spinning wheel.

She did not see him at once when he entered, because she was bending over a table, distributing twigs with leaves and taking away those that had been eaten bare. He watched her for a while. She had smooth dark hair, tied in a knot at the nape of her neck. Her hips were broad and her belly sagging from the many children she had brought into the world. She was a small woman with broad feet. When she turned, she started because she had not heard him come in.

"Why do you always startle me with your creeping around?" she said. "I'm an old woman; some day I'll have a stroke if you go on with your frightening me this way."

There was a faint smile in the bright grey eyes, set in a wrinkled countenance. Her mouth was almost toothless and her nose crooked. She had narrow, straight lips, but her chin was the broad, good-natured chin of her peasant stock, a mark of her Dutch ancestry.

"Where have you been so long?" she asked.

"Church and the council and other things, Elsje."

"Dear Lord, how important his honour the councillor is. And me, his poor wife, he leaves alone with these hungry beasts who will ruin us yet. I have to cut twigs by the armful to glut these silkworms. And what thanks do I get? My husband creeps into the house like a thief in the night and frightens me so that my knees shake."

She sat down sighing on a sturdy, plain chair.

"Well, tell me. You have something on your mind."

"You did not attend the services."

"I prayed at home, Joseph. I hope the dear Lord will forgive me that I can't observe the Sabbath because my husband raises silkworms and because I have to cook a Sunday roast with potato dumplings and compote as if we lived in the Promised Land."

Reimer leaned against the door. It was warm and quiet in the room. Now and then a twig crackled as a worm crawled over it, or a withered leaf snapped.

"Something bad has happened," he said.

"What?"

"Someone raped Lydia Miller."

The woman laid the twigs on the floor and brushed her hand over her apron to wipe away broken stems and leaves. She lowered her head. When she looked up again, her brows were knitted and she had the expression of a dog seeking a scent.

"Who?"

"A man named Parker. You know, the one who owns the hill on the other side of the brook." He fell silent.

"And?"

"No and. I spoke with her and she told me the story herself. It happened yesterday evening just before dark. You can imagine the rest."

"You're not telling me everything."

"We had a quarrel at the meeting. Schermer and a few others want to go and punish the fellow themselves. The majority preferred legal means. That's all."

"I don't believe you, Joseph."

"What do you mean? Really, that is all."

"Look here, I know you too well to listen to such stuff. I stand in the kitchen and cook and I feed silkworms and I work in the garden, and when I have to I scythe the wheat. But all that hasn't made me blind or deaf. Nor dumb, either. I have my ounce of brains and they have an idea there's something funny about this story, and you know it too."

Reimer brushed his hand over his head.

"You're seeing ghosts," he said, shrugging.

"I am not, Joseph. Elsje Reimer is a sensible old woman. She knows right from left. She's brought eight children into this world and she stands with her feet on the ground. And she doesn't see ghosts. If Mr. Joseph Reimer won't open his mouth, his wife will have to say it for him: there isn't a word of truth in this whole story."

For a while there was silence. The two old people looked at each other. They sat still, as though they had fallen asleep with eyes wide open.

Then Elsje began again. "You don't have to say anything, Joseph. I know you're thinking the same thing. You have the feeling that something is wrong. With Lydia. With those eyes of hers. And her loneliness. And her sudden blushes. With the way she's behaved ever since that affair in Topeka. I've watched her when she thought herself unobserved. I've seen the way she stands and stares, the way she lifts her hands suddenly and presses them against her breasts. She clenches her hands and digs her fists into her eyes, and then she lets her arms drop and shakes herself as if shuddering with horror. Afterwards she's pale as a corpse and forlorn as a lost soul."

"Yet she says it."

"She says it. Sure she does. The way normal people tell dreams." She shook her head and meditated for a moment. "What does Caroline say?"

"She cries."

"Does she believe it?"

"I don't know. She just sits and cries. She holds Lydia's hand and the girl sits on the edge of the bed, bright-eyed, wearing her best dress, and tells what happened in a voice so low you can hardly understand her."

But she goes on and on. It's as if she's lost all sense of shame. No, brother, she said, you don't know everything yet. No, you must understand that I saw everything clearly, although it was almost dark. There's something weird about it, something diabolic."

They heard footsteps in the courtyard. They turned and looked out the window. A young man was approaching. He ran, red-faced and sweating, swinging his arms. He was not watching his step, and nearly tripped over a rake that lay on the ground. When Reimer opened the door, he cried breathlessly, before he stopped running:

"The water is gone. There's no water in the brook. Parker has stolen our water."

The bed of the brook was not the same width at all points. There were places where it was twenty to thirty feet from bank, to bank. At other places a man could cross in two big strides.

The soil around it was reddish sand, sown with splinters of quartz. The sand glistened in the sun and crunched underfoot. But it was smooth and hard and footsteps made no impression on it.

Here and there stones were scattered. They were round and brown, like loaves of bread. From a distance their surfaces seemed smooth, but from close by you saw that they were pockmarked. When you lifted out the stones, the imprint remained.

The banks were overgrown with grass. They were high banks, because the brook swelled in the spring. These high banks formed a natural basin, especially at those places where the brook was wide. Here all that was necessary was to build a dam at the narrow end, and after a while there would be water enough for a large patch of land, even in the hottest part of summer. A simple job, if the wood and the tools were on the spot. Naturally, the land had to be prepared first. It would have to be dug—ploughed or trenched. A man would have to dig irrigation ditches, and where the ditches entered the basin he would have to place wooden gates to regulate the flow of water.

But Parker was inspired by the devil that morning. He had not slept all night, and he rose at dawn and went to the barn. He took the boards he had intended for repairs and carried them on his shoulders down to the brook. At the narrow place where he had determined to build the dam, he threw the boards on the ground. He did not take time to catch his breath. He rushed back to the house, called a few cheerful words to Patricia, and took up the saw, hammer and nails. Then he shouldered heavy beams and returned to the brook.

He built the dam. It was utterly foolish, what he was doing. Why should he want a dam? Was the soil ready? Were the irrigation ditches dug? What would he do with the water when it filled the basin?

He did not know and did not care. He wanted to build the dam. He

wanted to be certain he could do it. He would see whether it worked. Whether the water collected in the basin. He wanted to see it rising slowly between the banks and flooding gradually over the land. He wanted to be certain. Otherwise, why should he dig trenches and turn the earth and tear up the roots of trees?

And there was something else. The Mennonites. He must know where he stood with them. He must see what they would do when their water supply was stopped. He couldn't wait until after he had done all the labour. He must know at once, to-day. This was a Sunday; they would have time to confer. They would have time to negotiate with him, if they wanted to negotiate.

On either side of the brook he sank two heavy beams into the earth. They were long enough so that their tops projected above the level of the bank. These posts were about an inch apart, so that the boards which were to form the gate fitted snugly. The gate itself he had made of planks held together by crosspieces. He screwed a handle tightly to the top, and then placed the whole gate between the beams. To strengthen the entire structure, he linked the beams on each bank by cross braces. On both sides of the sluice he nailed small blocks on which it could rest when it was raised. Then he levelled the banks alongside the beams with earth and stones, so that the water could not escape around the sluice when it was closed. When he saw that it was trying to find a path underneath the gate, he smoothed the bed of the brook so that the gate rested firmly on the ground.

Finally he closed the sluice. He sat down on the bank and dangled his bare feet in the water. Very gradually it rose along his legs. It climbed from his instep to his ankles, and when he kicked his feet, the waves rose to his calves. The sun was hot. Parker yawned and closed his eyes. He might have fallen asleep had it not been for the wind that suddenly sprang up.

It appeared without warning, powerfully. Like an invisible iron roller it passed through the grass and rustled withered foliage.

Parker stood up. He was not quite certain what he should do. The wind might mean rain. It might mean he ought to tend to his hay, not waste more time on the dam. Perhaps he had better postpone the encounter with the Mennonites. On the other hand, perhaps this wind meant the end of the ominous feeling in the air that had been ever-present these twenty-four windless days.

He stood uncertain for a while. Then he took up the spade again and began digging. Why should he go off half-cocked? The sky was cloudless and the hay could wait. To-morrow he would mow part of the meadow. If only for Patricia's sake. It would be good to have something in the haymow, something he had seen growing, something that belonged to him like a gold nugget that one finds. Something that one has longed for

and seen coming all along; and when it is there, one takes it into the barn and stores it, and knows that the animals will have fodder all winter long.

No, he would keep his head. Everything in its time, and now was the time for the dam. The water in the basin was already forming a small pool. The wind rippled it. Patricia had a skirt that rippled like this water. She had worn it when she was still a dancer. That was long ago. A remote dream. And not a very pleasant dream.

He began digging the first trench. He might as well use as much of the water as possible. It was a shame that he would have to open the sluice when the pool reached the upper brink of the bank. Perhaps the Mennonites would not notice what was taking place, because they were at church now. They might not be aware of it until to-morrow or the day after, when he really took the water.

He decided not to open the sluice. A good soaking would not harm the land. He had heard that in Egypt the Nile overflowed the fields every year, and this was what made them fertile. Why should Kansas be different? It would loosen and open the earth. It would make it receptive to the seed, would awaken its strength and restore its vitality.

The basin was by now filled almost to the brim. The dam was water-soaked. Almost all the stones were underwater, and the air began to smell of damp earth. In a few minutes the first trickle would begin flowing into the grass of the bank.

Parker bent down to remove the tools. As he looked up, he saw someone coming down the hill. He was already halfway down; Parker could see that he was wearing dark trousers and a broad-brimmed hat. In a moment he would reach the rocks. He was descending diagonally. A moment later he caught sight of Parker. He stood still, funnelled his hands over his mouth and shouted something. Then he raised his arm high above his head. In his hand he held a red cloth. The cloth fluttered in the wind like a bloody banner.

Parker had opened his mouth to reply. Then he tossed the spade aside and began to run. When he came to the foot of the hill he lost sight of the man. He could not run toward him for fear of passing him. Bushes, grass and fern blocked his view. They flowed together into a mass of green. Somewhere within that mass was the man. Someone was there who was looking for him, who had waved a red cloth. Someone who might be coming from Patricia.

He raced back. The man was in the clearing now, sitting astride a rock and inching his way down. Parker recognized him. He squinted to see better. No, he was not mistaken, it was Bieber.

Again he began calling. Bieber stood still and answered. He must be saying "Come." Yes, that was it, "Come." Something must be wrong with Patricia. Again Parker called and again the answer came. He bent

down and picked up the tools. Then he ran to the hill. He stood still and called again. This time there was no answer.

He ran backwards once more until he could see the other man again. Bieber had altered his direction. "Here, here, here," Parker shouted. Bieber heard him. He looked down, then began running.

Meanwhile the water had risen over the banks. It was creeping among the grasses and briars, darkening the ground. The ground was hard and the water did not sink in. It remained on the surface. It scarcely looked like water, for it was covered with a thick layer of dust. It did not gleam. It moved like an animal, like a caterpillar, stretching out antennæ and crawling into all holes. It filled the holes to the brim, rose over the edges and crawled on.

When he heard the bushes crackling and was sure he would not miss Bieber, Parker ran toward him. He could not see him, but he could hear that he was close by.

"What's the matter?" he shouted.

"The locusts are coming."

Bieber was so breathless that Parker did not understand him.

"What's the matter?" he shouted again.

"The locusts, the locusts."

"And Patricia?"

There was no answer. Bieber was struggling through the underbrush. Parker caught a glimpse of red hands bending branches aside. Then he saw the man's lowered head, and Bieber stood before him.

He took the man by the shoulders and shook him. He felt that his face was distorted; his cheeks were stiff and his mouth wide open.

"What's the matter with Patricia?" he gasped.

Bieber did not understand. He shook his head. "Nothing, nothing's the matter. She's on your meadow, mowing." Then he pounded his fist against Parker's chest and began to shout.

"For God's sake, man, don't you understand? The locusts are coming. To-night or to-morrow. A man came from the neighbourhood. They're only fifty miles away. Maybe forty now. Maybe less. I came to get you so you can save something, if God wills. So you won't have to starve, you and your wife and your unborn baby. Clara sent me. My wife, Clara, because she has pity for you."

He grasped Parker's wrist and began dragging him up the hill.

"Every minute counts," he panted. "Whatever you get in to-day, you'll eat. The devil will fetch all the rest."

Parker stood still and wrenched his hand from Bieber's grasp.

"The sluice!" he cried.

"What about it?"

"It's closed."

"What does it matter now?"

"But the land will be flooded."

"Serves you right."

"Not only mine. The land on the other side too. The Mennonites' land."

Bieber shook his head. He began climbing the hill again. When he had gone a few steps, he stood still once more. He was already half concealed by the thicket, but his voice was clearly audible. "Hurry, Albert Parker," he shouted. "It's life or death for you and your wife. Leave the sluice alone. In the name of heavenly mercy, leave it alone."

"Tell Patricia I'm coming," Parker cried, and turned to rush down the hill.

When he emerged from the thicket, he saw the water. The layer of dust had sunk to the ground and the sun was reflected now in thousands of tongues of water that crept among the bushes and the grass.

Parker left the tools near a tree at the foot of the slope. He removed his shoes and stockings. The prairie grass and fern pricked the soles of his feet. Then he came to where he had been digging and the earth became warm and soft.

He descended into the dry bed of the brook on the lower side of the dam. The sand was still moist and there were puddles in the brook bed. Had the Mennonites noticed anything yet?

He gripped the handle on the sluice gate and tried to raise it. He slipped. He tried to find better footing. Again the sand gave underfoot. He glanced about and saw a round stone. He bent down. It was too heavy; he could not lift it. But he could roll it into the bed of the brook. The moisture in the sand was squeezed out as the stone rolled across it.

He rolled it into position near the dam. It settled into the sand with a dull splash, dug itself a small hollow. There it lay, dark and heavy, as though for ages this had been its resting place.

Parker straightened. His hands were wet and slippery; he wiped them on his pants. Again he gripped the handle of the sluice. He braced his feet against the stone. The rock slipped slightly, then lay motionless. Now he had firm footing. But it was not enough.

He released the handle and felt the crossbeams. The wood felt swollen and spongy. Something had stuck, he thought. He had not foreseen that the swelling of the planks would make it impossible to open the sluice. Where was it jammed? It would take time to find it. Ten minutes, perhaps more. And now seconds, not minutes counted. They would store only the food they saved to-day. Wasn't that what Bieber had said? Holy St. Patrick, what was he doing in the valley now? Up on the plateau was his unripe corn and his unripe wheat, his half-grown lettuce and his half-grown beans. Only the grass on the meadow was ripe, and he must cut this grass if he was to save anything at all. Hadn't Bieber said that Patricia was mowing? But she couldn't, she couldn't.

He climbed up the bank. He had done all he could. Let the land be

flooded. There was nothing he could do about it. If he had an axe, he might have been able to chop down the posts. But the axe was at home in the barn. He hadn't been able to carry it in the morning. He threw a final glance at the dam. Of course, it must be the weight of the water pressing the planks against the beams. That was it; he should have thought of it. What an idiot he was.

But what difference did it make, anyway—now that the locusts were coming? Their lives were menaced. Do you hear that, you Mennonites, our lives? Not my water or your water. Life itself. The gold I dug out of the earth. The house I built with my own hands. Patricia. The baby. Let the Mennonites' gardens be flooded. He had done his duty. He couldn't rip the dam out of the earth with his bare hands. He couldn't kick through inch-thick planks. He had done all he could do. By God, he had done his best. Panting, he fought his way up the slope. Water ran down his legs and into his boots; he had stuck his bare feet into the boots without troubling about socks. The sky was gloriously clear and silvery; the wind came from the side. It made it harder to wade through the grass because it bent the blades and laid them in his path.

When he reached the rocks, he changed his direction. He went diagonally upward. This would bring him out near the meadow. Now he had the wind half at his back, and he felt it help him along. He could move faster now, gain time. There was still plenty of time till evening. And perhaps he would have the whole night. Maybe none of it was true. He had only Bieber's word for it.

From far away he saw Patricia. She was bending forward, scythe in her hands, cutting the grass. Her legs were wide apart, and when she swung the scythe she turned her body from one side to the other. She was wearing a big hat and a coloured kerchief around her throat.

She had hitched up the oxen and brought the big hay wagon. She had tied the reins to a pointed stone.

The animals were grazing. They looked up when they heard Parker coming. Their jaws chewed placidly and they stared steadily at him out of their gentle eyes. They were eating their fill. Good that they were.

"Hello, there," Parker cried.

Patricia stopped in the midst of a swing. When she recognized him, she dropped the scythe and hastened toward him. She did not run. Running would not be good for the baby. But she moved as fast as she could. She took long strides and leaned her body backward. She felt the wind on her damp clothes, whipping against her side and between her firm breasts. It was good to feel the wind. It gave one courage and strength, made one free.

"I'm glad you've come," she said as she kissed him. "The meadow is so big. So terribly big when you have to cut it." She looked at him closely. "Is something the matter, Albert?" she asked.

"The locusts."

She nodded. "A man came and said they would be here to-night or to-morrow morning. He said there was something queer about them this year. They don't stay more than a few hours or a single night."

Could it be true that the locusts would remain only a few hours? That they would fly on before they had stripped everything bare? Why should they do that?

"Are you afraid of locusts?" Patricia asked softly.

"No. Are you?"

"No. I was afraid when I first heard. I ran to Bieber's and asked Clara to send her husband for you. I knew I couldn't climb down the hill myself. Then I came back and hitched up the oxen and came out here. Since I started mowing I haven't been afraid."

"What will we do with the grass?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where shall we put all this fresh fodder?"

"In the loft."

"And in a few days it will begin to rot. It gets hot. It might even catch fire."

"Then we'll take part of it into the house and leave part in front of the house and cover it with burlap bags. We have almost a hundred bags, Albert."

Parker shook his head. It seemed so hopeless. So desperate. If the locusts really came, everything would be lost.

He put his arm around Patricia and walked across the meadow with her to the place where she had dropped the scythe. He took the whetstone from the pocket of Patricia's apron and began to sharpen the scythe.

"What about the dam?" Patricia asked, picking up the rake from the ground.

"The hell with the dam," Parker said, and began cutting the grass.

The doors of the houses of Gnadenau stood open. On the thresholds sat the cats, sunning themselves and washing their faces. The windows were closed and the wind rattled the panes in their frames. Here and there wisps of smoke rose from a chimney; but most of the fires on which the women had cooked the meals had gone out. After a while the stamping of the oxen in their stalls was the only sign of life in Gnadenau on this Sunday afternoon.

The people had left the village. They had gone down to the valley to see with their own eyes the drying-up of the brook. They had gone by families, and since each farmer owned part of the slope they did not have to trespass on the stranger's land. The men were grave and solemn in their close-fitting brown coats; the women were anxious, and the children chattered low-voiced.

When they came to the brook, they found all the water gone save a few small puddles. The sand in the bed of the stream was still soft; it looked like a pink band of velvet. Most of the farmers had not yet cultivated the land along the bank, but here and there one had planted vegetables and all of them had used the brook to water their cattle. This stream was vital to the settlement; had it not been there, they would never have bought the land.

The families walked along the bank until they met their neighbours. The children squatted on their heels and fingered out little trenches around the puddles. They watched the water finding courses among the grains of sand until the puddles were emptied and nothing remained of them but a shimmering glassy surface. They heard their parents conversing in low voices and they sensed that something unusual was taking place.

Gradually the whole village assembled in one place. The men stood together, the women remained at one side. The older children sat down on stones; only the little ones continued to play with the puddles.

When the women heard Schermer's voice they stopped talking. They lowered their eyes, clasped their hands over their bellies and listened. Some nodded approval when he said what they themselves had been thinking. Yes, you could endure a good deal because you were patient and strong, because you had your faith, your community and ancient laws that were like your very flesh and blood, laws such as, "Thou shalt not kill."

But there must be some limit to patience and humility. Even for Mennonites. One had the right to defend oneself against beasts. There was a justice higher than the law and superior to obedience to authority. Honour was a birthright that could never be sold or forsworn.

Reimer stood beside Schermer, and Miller beside Reimer. Their faces were expressionless and their eyes concealed beneath half-closed lids. Their lips were invisible, their mouths straight lines.

When Schermer concluded his speech, they shook their heads.

Then Reimer stepped forward and began to speak. His voice was low, and the women could not understand what he was saying because the wind plucked his words away before they reached their group. The men, however, heard well.

"You must be neither plaintiffs nor judges. You must not set passion above reason, nor violence above justice. You must not counter wrong with wrong, nor make yourselves links in the evil chain that is compounded of crime and vengeance. You must not forget the strength that God has given you, which lies not in the strength of your fists and muscles or your flails and torches, but in the clarity of your minds and the tenacity of your wills—the strength of your industry. How many Mennonites would still be alive if we had taken up the sword and fought

with the weapons of the others; if we had lived by the trumpet and drum instead of living gently and humbly, modestly and humanely?"

When he had finished he looked up and his eyes met Lydia's.

She and her mother had not come to the valley with the rest. Caroline was afraid to face the eyes of the other women. But Lydia had soon grown restless at home. "We have nothing to hide," she had said. "We have done nothing wrong. If we don't show ourselves the others will think we're ashamed. But I'm not ashamed. Why should I be ashamed?"

They had descended the slope slowly and remained standing near the group of men. Lydia with her arm through her mother's. She stood erect beside the little woman, her head thrown back and her eyes half shut, smiling a distorted smile.

The men turned when they realized that someone was standing beside them. They greeted the women with mingled embarrassment and curiosity. Then Schermer went to Lydia and her mother.

He doffed his big round hat and held out his hand to Lydia.

"God bless you, sister," he said.

"God bless you, brother."

Schermer cleared his throat and began twisting his hat between his fingers. He stood before her, tall and uneasy, and finally he turned and went, red-faced, back to the men.

Lydia looked at the women, who had turned their heads toward her. Was she not stronger than all of them? Had she not endured something that God imposed only on those who could bear it? Had she not suffered a martyrdom that made her a saint? Something had happened to her alone that placed her above the others of her sex. Something that made Schermer remove his hat and blush. She was one of the chosen, one of the blessed.

But had she suffered it? Had she really? Or had it been a dream? Wasn't it a lie? Dear God, was it a lie?

She felt her heart contract and a hot breath pass through her body. It began at her breasts and spread out over her throat and head. It passed over the nape of her neck, down her spine, over her waist and her legs. Her knees grew wobbly and her hands quivered; for a moment there was a mist over her eyes. She heard a roaring in her ears that deafened her; her mouth was so parched she could barely whisper.

"Please, let us go, Mother," she said.

Unsteadily, she began walking uphill across the meadow beside her mother. She felt the villagers' eyes following her. She knew that the women's were sympathetic and the men's embarrassed.

When she heard Schermer's voice, she stood still. The wind was swishing through the grass and the roaring was still in her ears, so that she could not understand what the man was saying.

"Can you understand him?" she whispered to her mother.

"Yes."

"What is he saying?"

"That he won't stand for it."

"That he won't stand for it?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"That he will take torches and finish the devil once and for all; he says he'll do it alone if need be."

"What else?"

"That he doesn't care about justice and law and that, God knows, you don't matter to him, and that he has his old father and mother to take care of, but that the Mennonites matter a great deal to him and he won't be a yellow coward whom people will point their fingers at . . ."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I can't understand because they're all talking at once."

Lydia began walking again. She took big strides, drawing her mother along with her. She had heard enough. She could not bear any more talk of torches, nor think of Schermer's big fists and Parker's poor house and the woman who was expecting a baby.

The Mennonites returned to the village toward four o'clock. The shadows of the houses were long, and although the doors had stood open all afternoon the men found the air stale in their houses. They opened the windows. Then they changed from their Sunday clothes and went to the barns. The sun shone in through the narrow windows, filamented with spiderwebs and obscured further by the mixture of dust and rain encrusted on the outside. In the course of the afternoon the sun had moved through the entire barn; in a few hours, when its rays touched the opposite wall, it would be dusk.

Schermer sat on a stool and milked one of the Texas cows he had bought the year before. It wasn't time to milk her yet, but he might return late and he wanted to have everything in order before he left. One never knew. There were three of them, and they were going not secretly, by night, but in the full light of day when everyone could see they were without weapons, without pitchforks or flails. They would not even need torches. Merely sulphur matches. Ordinary sulphur matches.

The cow looked around, as if to make sure he was her usual milker. The milk hissed into the pail and formed a thick foam that looked like the bubbles in the fermenting vats of a brewery. The animals in the adjoining stalls shifted; Schermer heard the ox lurch against the wooden wall and snuffle; then he began to feed. If Parker has a gun this may well be the last time I'll hear that sound, he thought. He might be on his guard, just waiting for them to come, hoping to shoot a few Mennonites.

Father and mother would have a hard time of it doing all the work if he didn't come back. But how fine they had been, the two of them. They hadn't said a word to him. Not even looked at him. They had walked away when the discussion grew hot. Arm in arm they had gone away together, walking slowly because his father found it hard to get about nowadays. But they had clung to each other during the whole way and not looked back once.

Schermer was irritated because the cow gave only half a pail. He put fresh fodder in the manger and gave her a contemptuous pat on the nose; then he carried the milking stool to the Hereford cow which his father had bought a long time ago.

When he was finished, he went to the parlour to say good-bye to his parents. They were sitting at a round table near the window with a book of Mennonite histories open before them; his father was reading aloud as he did every Sunday afternoon. He had put on his glasses—he wore them low down on his nose—and Schermer's mother had folded her hands in her lap and crossed her ankles.

His father did not look up when Schermer entered. He went on reading as though he had not heard.

"I'm done with the barn chores," the son said.

His father nodded.

"I'm going now."

Again the old man nodded.

"I think I'll be back in about three hours."

His father continued with what he had been reading. "'Wherefore dost thou need weapons when thou hast God on thy side?'" His frail voice was calm and even, his head bent close over the book. "'Is not his commandment, Thou shalt not kill? And wherefore shouldst thou kill if thou hast faith in his justice?'"

Slowly Schermer walked to the door. He paused there and looked around once more. His father was reading; his mother had turned her head and was looking with kindly sadness at her son.

Out on the street, he was strongly tempted to turn back. But then the two others joined him and it was too late. The three men strode rapidly along the wheel ruts until they were out of the village.

At Schermer's side walked August Defries, a small, fat boy with deep-black eyes almost hidden beneath puffed cheeks. He squinted slightly, was bowlegged, and shuffled his feet as he walked. A few paces behind them came Philip Kettler, a lanky boy with a long head and a ready smile. A too-ready smile; many in the village thought he was not all there.

They spoke little, but frequently they glanced at one another. Each found the others' faces strangely altered and distorted. There were wrinkles under their eyes; their lips were thin and their noses sharp. Surreptitiously they brushed their hands over their own faces as though

to wipe away something they felt there, something that was unnatural and inhuman, like the spiderwebs that brush repulsively across the face when one walks in the forest.

They descended into the valley. When they came to a turning, they saw the water. It filled the whole valley, a sparkling pool casting back the sunlight.

Schermer stood still and peered with hand over his eyes. The others imitated him. The sunlight on the water blinded them. They smelled the moisture of the earth, for the wind blew into their faces.

"Look at that," Schermer said.

They could see clearly now that the water had risen to the lower leaves of the vegetables and was running over into the cornfields. It was tan and flickering when the wind stirred it. The green humps of pumpkins and melons rose out of it like the backs of turtles; the straight rows of cabbages seemed to be gliding steadily along in the water and bobbing up and down in it.

Kettler began to laugh, as though he saw something humorous in water standing a foot deep over the Mennonites' land.

"Shut up," Schermer snarled at him. "This is our land. Yours and mine, Philip. Don't you understand?"

He was secretly glad to have still another cause for rage. This damming of the brook concerned all. It hurt everyone; it was a crime all could understand. Here was something you couldn't wait for the sheriff to straighten out, something you had to fight against with your two fists. Schermer felt that his face was no longer distorted; the ugly feeling of guilt was dissipating.

"Can you see the dam?" he asked.

"No."

"I think it must be in the neck of the valley. Where our land ends."

"Uh-huh."

"On his land."

"Yes, on his land."

They descended to the brink of the water. There they sat down on the ground and drew off their boots. They tied the laces together and slung the boots over their shoulders. Then they rolled up their trouser legs and stepped into the water. It was cold, and the ground felt hard underfoot. But after a few paces it became soft and slippery and they were compelled to walk carefully.

They stood still when they reached the bed of the brook.

"Maybe he's still at the dam," Schermer said.

"That wouldn't be bad," Defries growled.

Kettle sat down on one of the round stones in the former bed. "He may have a gun; he'll shoot us down like partridges when he sees us coming."

"Rot," Schermer said.

Kettler shrugged. With his fingers he began scraping away the mud from between his toes.

Defries looked at him. He felt an inclination to follow Kettler's example, but he was ashamed. They had not come here to sit on stones and scrape mud from between their toes.

"What do you think?" he asked Schermer.

"I think we ought to approach it from three sides."

"Good."

"You take the slope, I'll go up the brook, Kettler over our fields."

"Don't you want me to go up the brook?"

"No."

"It's sort of dangerous coming straight at him."

"No, it isn't."

"There's no place to duck if he shoots."

"I don't think he will."

"But suppose he does?"

Schermer laughed. "Then he'll miss."

When they met at the dam half an hour later, there had been no shooting. Nothing had happened. The water plashed softly and withered leaves glided gently over its surface. Occasionally a struggling beetle kicked against their legs for a moment, then was washed away as they waded on.

Schermer examined the dam carefully. He tried to open it, bracing himself against the stone that Parker had used for support that morning. The stone gave slightly, because Schermer was bigger and stronger than Parker, but the sluice did not move and the handle began to loosen.

Schermer shook his head. "Solidly built," he said.

Defries said nothing. He had begun shaking the posts. They were sunk deep into the ground, but nevertheless they yielded slightly when he braced himself against them. Kettler stood watching him, hands in his pockets.

After a while Schermer came over to him. In his hand he held a round stone. He used it as a hammer at the place where the cross braces were nailed to the posts. The sound of his hammer blows was muted, because he did not strike the broad face of the board; he directed the stone diagonally upward against the narrow edge. The wood began to splinter; finally he had hammered a small space between cross brace and post.

Schermer dropped the stone and took hold of the upper edge of the plank. He tugged. The nails in the wood squealed. The crack widened; now it was almost half an inch deep, so that he could thrust his fingers into it and get a better grip to tug against the lower nails. Again came the squealing sound of the nails, and then the plank was loose. The two posts were no longer bound together.

It was heart-warming to be able to destroy this thing. How Parker must have worked to drag all this wood over the hill. How he must have strained to sink those posts into the ground, to nail the planks together. And how ridiculous were his efforts against Schermer's strength. He, Schermer, could tear it apart with his bare hands. He pulled on the post while Defries pushed against it from the other side. They were showing him, this stranger, showing him that he couldn't get away with these things. Mennonites they were; they were patient and they condemned violence, and they lived by the Word of God. But they were men. Their hands were as strong as his; with the power in their shoulders they could thrust out of the earth a post that had stood against thousands of pounds of water.

Slowly the heavy beam bowed. The wood cracked and groaned, but it did not break. It was the earth that gave. The soil loosened. The sand had not yet set; the humus had not yet grown together again into a compact mass. The sluice leaned. The water began streaming through between it and the posts.

Schermer did not notice that he was soaking wet. He was happy. Everything had gone well. They had not needed to fight. They had dealt Parker a blow before they reached him. Somewhere near here the thing had happened to Lydia. This dam had stood as a memorial to Parker's crime. Now that memorial was gone. It had been unable to defend itself. It had been too weak, and Parker himself had not defended it. He must have thought they would sleep, or pray and run to the sheriff. He was mistaken; he didn't know them.

Schermer waded to the bank.

"Go away," he said to Defries, who offered to help him.

He took hold of the sluice gate, which still rested between the posts on the other side, and drew it toward him. It ground in the sand, and then it was free. It was ripped loose by the mass of water, and even Schermer was not strong enough to hold it. It was snatched out of his hand and hurled downstream until it struck a stone, turned over and lay still.

The water level began to lower. The basin emptied itself torrentially. The streamlets that had formed on the bank vanished. The streams on the lower-lying land were no longer being fed, and the earth began to suck up the water through its myriad pores.

The three men climbed to the slope of the hill and sat down on a rock. They cleaned their legs and feet with leaves, and then they dangled them in the sun until they dried. They were tired, but in good spirits. What they had done, they felt, was magnificent; the rest seemed easy. They sat with shoulders squared, rubbing their wrists and forearms with caressing gestures and talking with firmness and self-assurance.

Finally they drew on their boots and socks and stood up. They gazed at the sky above the hill. It was pale-blue, already tinged with silver, as

it often is in the late afternoon of a sunny day. They began ascending the hill in single file. When they came to the rocks, they stood still and looked back. The valley was peaceful and the earth brown and fertile. The sun came from behind them, so that they could no longer see the pools of water that still lingered here and there. Schermer took the sulphur matches out of his pocket to make sure they were not wet. He rubbed one on a rock; it flared up and went out as soon as the head was burnt. The wind must be good for a healthy fire. It was so strong one had to stand with legs apart to avoid being forced to one side.

There's something wrong with this wind, Kettler thought suddenly. Perhaps a storm was brewing. He turned his head to look. And so he was the first to see the locusts.

They came from the west, and the sun stood almost squarely over the centre of them. They were like a mist hanging over all the slopes as far as the eye could see; in the middle they seemed motionless, but the edges were in continual, wavelike motion.

"Say," Kettler said, touching Schermer's shoulder.

"What?"

"Look down there."

Schermer turned.

Defries came up to them and held his hand over his eyes. He stared for a while, then looked sidewise at Schermer. Why was the big man so pale?

"What is it?" he asked.

"A swarm."

"What?"

"Locusts, I think."

"Is it bad?"

Schermer did not reply, and all three stared at the cloud that was rapidly filling the whole of the sky.

The wind grew steadily stronger. They felt its coolness on their sweat-soaked shirts, and the sand it bore from the hollow forced them to squint.

"We ought to go," Kettler said. The wind drowned his words.

"What?" Defries asked.

"They'll be needing us in the village." He shouted, and this time Defries understood him.

"Especially a fellow like you who's such a hand at praying."

Schermer started violently and gripped Defries by the arm.

"Shut up," he growled.

"What for?"

"Because you are sinning."

"To hell with it."

"Shut up, I tell you."

A strange pallor had settled over the land. The cloud had passed

before the sun, moderating its light to a fantastic sallowness. It was the kind of sun that sometimes appears for a few minutes at twilight, after a thunderstorm. The cloud had widened on both sides, as though gradually encircling the entire valley of Gnadenau.

Kettler began descending the hill, paying no attention to the others. He had parents, brothers and sisters to think of. His family had just arrived this year; if they did not save something, they would be forced to depend on the charity of the community next year.

After a while he heard the others following him.

The wind was still gathering strength, wildly tossing the clouds that it rolled over the hill. Now it compressed them into tight, opaque balls, now scattered them into fine droplets of mist. It piled one cloud upon the other, building smooth, straight walls; or it kneaded them into cylinders and balanced one on top of the other until the topmost cylinder leaned forward, teetered and then whirled downward into the abyss.

The air grew darker and more disquieting. Besides the roar of the wind the men now heard a distant humming. They set their teeth, clenched their fists and shivered, although the sweat was pouring down their collars. They felt a delicate tickling sensation on the back of their necks down to their shoulders. They could no longer place their feet squarely on the ground, and there was a flickering before their eyes that did not come from cobwebs or drops of sweat. However, they could see that the clouds were dissolving into millions of tiny dots, like drifting snow against a wintry sky.

They shuddered when they saw the first flash of lightning. It was very small, like a spark in the mist of a cloud. Again it flashed. The men passed their hands over their eyes, not certain they had seen anything at all.

They stood still, bowing their heads. Perhaps this was not a locust swarm. Perhaps the heavens were raining fire and brimstone. Perhaps this was the end, the Day of Judgment, when guilty and innocent alike would be judged.

The humming in the air had become a deafening, incessant buzzing. The tiny dots had increased in size and the miniature lightnings were more intense. They flashed here and there, in a thousand places at the same time. The flashes came and vanished so swiftly that the men were never quite sure what they were seeing.

Schermer started back as the first insect struck his head. It felt like a hailstone. But at the same time he had had a sensation of fluttering that made the contact utterly repulsive. It was so dark now that the sun seemed to have set. All around them the grass moaned with a pattering sound. In spite of the wind they heard blades of grass snapping as the insects hurtled against them. Defries was struck; he shook himself, feeling that the insect was still clinging to him. His hand darted to his hair, and for the first time Schermer heard the sound locusts make when

they are crushed between the fingers. The flickering in the air and the flashes of lightning increased; a ripple of light seemed to pass through the entire swarm.

The wind was still whirling most of the locusts above their heads. Perhaps God would be merciful, they thought. He would think on them as they thought on Him wherever they were and wherever they walked. Perhaps He would smile down upon them because they lived by His commandments and had come across the seas from the land of their fathers so that His will might be done, so that they need not be unfaithful to His laws. O Lord, our fathers and mothers are old; we have but a few poor cattle in our barns and a small patch of land; we feed ourselves and our cattle by the sweat of our brows. O Lord, we have nought but the strength in our hands, nought but the harvest that still stands in our fields; we have nought else to shield us against the hunger of the winter.

They held their hands over their heads and hunched their shoulders when the main mass of the swarm was driven down to earth.

Within the wind a new sound came to their ears. It was like the rumbling of a thunderclap. It was still far away, but in a few seconds it was already near them and the noise of it drowned out every other sound. Then it was upon them.

They closed their eyes when the swarm descended, and bent low. They made themselves as small as possible, but they could not crawl into holes in the earth like the field mice, and so they were struck on chest and head and legs and arms and hands; no part of their bodies was spared. And each time the locusts struck, it was not only like the impact of a hailstone, but a repulsive contact with a crawling, fluttering thing. So long as the wind howled tempestuously, it hurled the locusts against the men with such force that the creatures could not cling to them. But as soon as the wind abated for a moment, the insects held fast to their clothes and crawled under their coat collars. The locusts were dazed at first, but as soon as they recovered they began to crawl cautiously. They crawled over the men's necks, into their shirt sleeves and trousers. Their bodies were cool, their legs stiff and skeletal as bits of straw. The men crushed them between thumb and forefinger when they caught them. Their skin grew uncomfortably greasy from the gut they squeezed out of the insects' abdomens. Sometimes they swatted them; then parts of the crushed insect remained hanging on the spot where they had struck.

The wind, which had paused for a few seconds, sprang to life again with renewed keenness. Through half-closed eyelids Schermer could see that it was bearing a fresh swarm. This one came down the valley itself, resembling a wave advancing with uncanny speed between two hills. Again Schermer saw the flickering and darts of lightning; and suddenly

he realized that it was not lightning but the reflection of the sun upon millions of wings. O God, he thought, the sun is still shining; somewhere is a place where there are no locusts; somewhere the sky is peaceful and people are sitting on benches before their houses, holding hands and waiting for the night.

The impact of the new swarm was so violent that Kettler lost his balance. He stumbled forward a few steps, striving to hold himself erect, then fell to the ground. He lay on his side, still holding one hand over his head. Underneath him he felt creatures beginning to crawl. He propped his hand against the ground in order to force himself erect. The ground was alive. It had legs, hard, stiff legs; it had a crackling, chitinous thorax and a soft, slippery, sluglike abdomen.

Kettler felt his outspread hand crush a cluster of the beasts; and at the same time others crawled over the back of his hand, and still others began climbing under his collar and down his body. He sprang to his feet, drew off his coat and began racing madly across the meadow. Almost at once he stumbled and fell again. The insects were on him, inside him, everywhere. In the hair of his chest, under his arms, in his eyes.

I'm innocent, my God, I'm innocent, he cried inwardly. I didn't intend to murder Parker, didn't intend to destroy the dam. God must know he was just a poor devil who tried to be good, who walked behind the plough in the heat of the sun so that his family would have food on the table; God knew he slept on the bare ground instead of a bed; that he was poor and had not even a pair of decent shoes.

He lay motionless, numb with fright. Schermer could just see him through his half-shut eyes. He touched Defries, who was squatting stiffly at his side.

"What's the matter with Kettler?" he shouted.

Defries shook his head. Schermer could see the motion but not the head, because Defries had pulled up his coat collar and folded his arms over his face.

Schermer went over to Kettler.

"What's wrong with you?" he screamed in the boy's ear.

Slowly Kettler straightened until he was kneeling with arms outspread in front of Schermer.

"We must pray," he shouted.

The locusts were all over him, clinging in his hair, to his ears, everywhere; but he seemed not to notice. His long face was white, his lips parted and quivering as though he had been seized by a fit. Schermer squatted down beside him and began picking the locusts off Kettler and crushing them in his big fists. Then he put his hand on Kettler's shoulder and pulled him close to himself. He felt how the boy's whole body trembled.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No."

"Afraid?"

"No."

"Then why are you trembling?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Kettler whispered almost inaudibly, "Dear Lord in heaven, what will happen to us? Dear God, we haven't a loaf of bread in the house. Dear God in heaven, our fodder is still in the fields. We have only one cow in our barn and father is sick and mother ailing and Louis is only ten and Catherine five."

Schermer said nothing. The insects were still hailing down upon them, but the sky was a little brighter. The wind seemed to be moderating; perhaps they would soon be able to return to the village.

Kettler went on in a whispering moan: "We have only ourselves to blame. You and Defries and I. You thought of killing, brother, and we two went along with you. But He did not permit it. He sent the locusts to keep us back, and now He is punishing us, and the innocent with us." He looked appealingly at Schermer. "What is going to happen to us now?" he asked after a while.

Smiling, Schermer shook his head. He opened his mouth to reply, then realized that it was all over; the sun was shining and a gentle breeze was blowing over the hill.

Schermer stood up and stretched. He brushed the locusts out of his hair and clothes, then looked around. Defries was shaking out his shirt. The ground had changed. It had turned greenish-brown in colour and was moving like wind-blown water. Clusters of locusts hung on everything green, or flew with fluttering wings from blade to blade.

"Listen!" Kettler exclaimed.

"What?"

"Just listen."

Schermer held his breath and opened his mouth. He leaned his head slightly to one side. Yes, he heard something.

It was a faint clicking, like the crackling of a distant fire or the bursting of a seed pod; or like the sound of autumn leaves falling on one another.

Schermer stood motionless. The sound grew louder. It came from all sides. From the bushes, from grass and fern, flowers and moss. Now it was like grinding teeth. Like the sound one made chewing radishes, or crumbling a slightly stale crust of bread. It was a disgusting, repulsive, uncanny sound.

And yet it was only something perfectly natural. The locusts had begun to feed.

All day long Albert and Patricia Parker had looked up at the sky, and as the day waned their smiles became more relaxed and hopeful. The locusts were not coming. They had turned aside on the way. Some-

where, they had found more fertile feeding grounds than immature wheatfields and skinny ears of corn.

When the wind blew more strongly, and finally began to howl, they stopped mowing. They loaded on the wagon as much fresh grass as it would hold and Parker walked the oxen to the barn. Patricia fell asleep on the wagon, and Parker had to awaken her when they arrived. She handed the pitchforks and scythes down to him, and then she slid carefully down the heap of grass to the shafts, from where Parker lifted her gently to the ground. Then he unhitched the oxen, chained them to their rings and fetched water from the well.

The locusts came while they were stowing the fodder in the barn. At first the Parkers did not notice the occasional thuds against the wooden walls. They moved slowly and wearily, pausing now and then for a word. They did not run to the door until the continual rattling against the walls began, and then, because the door opened to the west, the storm hurled locusts by the handful into their faces.

They closed and barred the two heavy wings of the barn door. But it was of little use; the walls were unsound and the locusts entered through holes as big as Parker's fist.

Parker had been paying no attention to the oxen because he had too many other things to think about. There was the mown grass that still lay out in the meadow, and the grass on the wagon; there was the corn, the wheat, the vegetables. He fetched straw and began stuffing the holes in the walls, while Patricia spread burlap bags over the grass, tucking in the fodder as one would tuck in a baby. So busy were they that they did not notice how maddened the animals had become until one ox broke free.

Parker had chained it to a ring that had been loose for a long time. Again and again he had resolved to repair it, but always there had been something else to do.

There was a sharp, cracking sound as the wood splintered, and then the ox was out of the stall and racing toward the end of the barn with lowered head. When he struck against the wooden wall, the whole barn shivered, and for a moment Parker thought the wall would give way. Dust sifted down from everywhere; the room grew dark and the air was scarcely breathable.

When she heard the splintering wood, Patricia had fled to the ladder that led into the hayloft. She tried to open the trapdoor, but it was too heavy for her. She was standing six feet above the floor, and she felt that the rung would break if she pushed too hard. There was so much dust that she could not see Albert. It was thick as smoke, and shot through with narrow bands of sunlight that crisscrossed in the room like strips of confetti.

She called to Albert and heard him reply to her from the door, but she could not understand what he was saying.

When the ox ran against the wall the second time, he broke one of his horns. He began bellowing so fiercely that Patricia clapped her hands over her ears. She balanced precariously on the ladder, leaning back against it. Now the ox was standing with legs spread at the rear wall, hammering his head against the boards. His long tail whipped like a lash through the air. Gradually the nails in the planks yielded and the cracks in the walls widened. Pallid rays of light entered through these cracks and showed Patricia the splotches of blood on the ground under the ox's head, the flat cakes of dung in the gutter, and the locusts crawling along the floor. On the other side of the barn, near the door, she saw Albert slowly approaching her.

Then Patricia saw the other ox. She had not heard him thrashing in his box, throwing the whole weight of his massive body backward again and again. Knowing that the ring that held him to the wall was set firmly and that the chain was strong, she had not troubled to think of him. But now he was loose. For a second he stood in the middle of the room kicking up the dust with his hoofs. For a second he was so close to Albert that he almost touched him.

Then he, too, plunged across the barn and crashed his head against the rear wall to the right of the other. The impact was so great that the ox went to his knees. For a moment his heavy body lay over his bent legs. He swayed and Patricia hoped he would fall over on his side. But then he drew his legs out from under his body and stood up. He took a few steps backward, then again lunged at the wall.

Albert was now at the foot of the ladder. He stepped on the first rung.

"A hell of a thing," he shouted.

"Can't you do anything?" Patricia asked, bending down to him.

"Maybe douse them with water."

He went to fetch the pail he used for watering the animals at night. It stood in the corner.

But it was too late. The first ox had knocked the boards loose. There was an opening wide enough for him to force his head and forefeet through. He squeezed into the opening, then braced his forefeet against the ground to pull his hindquarters through. But he couldn't; he was stuck.

It was at this moment that the second great wave of locusts descended. The storm hurled the greater part of the creatures against the front of the barn, but some of them were swept over the roof and around the corners because the barn created a kind of vacuum and small whirlwinds formed in the rear of it. The locusts no longer flew in diagonal but in straight lines against the ground; they whirled around a central point, an upright cylinder of living bodies. When they struck against the head of the ox, the great animal seemed to go mad. He could not defend himself because he was stuck fast. But he reared up within the prisoning wall, and Patricia saw how the hail of locusts beat against his head, his eyes,

his muzzle, his ears, poured into his wide-open mouth and thudded against his gleaming throat. The locusts clung fast to him, fastened upon his bloody wounds. Again and again the animal reared and threw himself to one side, but the boards seemed to press more firmly against his flanks. Finally his feet missed the floor and he fell to his knees. For a moment his hindquarters remained up and his back slanted steeply, while his tail whipped through the air and slapped against the wall. Then he collapsed. He slid to the ground, and the broken planks gashed a bloody line down his body.

The ox at his side suddenly stopped beating against the wall when he saw the daylight streaming in through the broken wall. Blood poured on the ground from his shattered horn. He stretched his neck forward and stood rigid for a moment, legs wide apart, motionless except for the gyrating tail that clapped against his belly. Then he stamped forward. The huge body on the thin, sinewy legs plunged toward the appearance of liberty. Toward the open spaces where he could run madly and save himself from the terror. He stepped on the body of the ox that lay in the opening. He set his feet on the other's ribs, on his spine and his shoulder blades. He propelled himself forward as far as he could, and then he, too, stuck fast. He braced himself and lunged forward, digging his hoofs into the other's hide. The hard hoofs scraped his fellow's hide, dug through to the naked flesh.

The animal on the floor had tried to stand up when he felt the other's hoofs upon him. He failed. He could not move. He tried thrashing about, bracing himself against the sharp edges of the planks and digging his knees into the floor, tossing his head back and forth. But his efforts were in vain; he remained where he was.

Meanwhile the whirling cylinder of locusts had struck the other ox also. Patricia heard Albert groan. She came down the steps of the ladder.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" she shouted, tears in her eyes.

Parker's face was frozen. He shook his head. Too late. This was too much for any one man—too mad, too diabolic.

"O God, he's trampling the other to death," Patricia whispered. "Holy Mother of God, save him, save him. Our lives depend on him; don't let him be trampled to death. Mother Mary, let him live; stop the blood from running out of his body. Holy Virgin, plead for our poor ox—our poor innocent beast who's worked so hard for us."

When she heard the shoulder blades breaking, she clapped her hands over her eyes and leaned against the ladder. Parker put his hand gently on her head. She stood still for a while, then turned around.

"What about the fodder?" she asked.

Parker laughed scornfully and pointed to the opening in the wall.

"The whole barn is full of them," he said, "They're all over our fodder."

"And?"

Parker shrugged.

Patricia took his hand and drew him along with her. They went to the place where they had piled the grass they had brought in before the locusts came. It was dark in the corner and they could see little more than a small dark heap. Patricia bent down and ran her hand over the fresh stalks. She could feel the insects clinging one beside the other. They had been feeding for some time, but the creaking of the wall had been so loud that she had not heard the gnawing sound.

Patricia began separating the grass until she had it spread out in a flat surface. Then she walked back and forth across it, trampling the locusts underfoot. It was good to feel their bodies cracking under her shoes, wonderful to hear the snapping sound. It was like a dance; the cracking of the locusts' bodies reminded her of the clicking of her silver heels.

"Bring sacks," she called to Albert, who was busy plugging one of the holes in the wall. When he brought the burlap bags to her, she filled them with grass and tied them.

"This is saved, Albert," she said.

"It isn't much."

"We'll save more."

For a moment Parker did not reply. Then, in a low, mournful voice, he said, "Oh, Silverheel."

Patricia took him by the shoulders, her strong hands pressing into the flesh at the base of his neck. She dug her fingers into his muscles and bent forward until she was so close to his face she could clearly see his large round eyes. When she spoke, it was with a certain awkwardness and with frequent pauses between sentences. Her voice was so low it seemed to Parker that it was not the voice of someone else at all, but a voice within himself.

"Do you think I would have saved you from the cholera if I'd gone around moaning and bawling?" she said. "Do you think I would have saved you if I hadn't cursed sometimes and prayed sometimes and never thought anything but that I would save you? Do you think I would have stood it all alone, with what little strength I had, wrapping you in hot compresses every minute of the night? All by myself, with maybe the help of the Virgin. Maybe without Her help, how do I know? Maybe She didn't come to me because I was a whore. That's what I was afraid of, all the time. She'll let *you* die, I said to myself, even though you're innocent; She'll punish *you* because of me. But I wanted to save you, and I did everything I could think of. The night you were cold I took off all my clothes and covered you with them, and lay down beside you to warm you with my body. Because I wanted to save you. And it helped; next morning you were better."

She fell silent, and Albert put his arm around her and kissed her.

"We won't fail, Albert," she whispered. "We won't. Not like this. We'll keep our farm. Do you hear me, Albert?"

The wind had slackened; now only a few locusts were pattering against the barn. But inside there were thousands. They were eating the fodder in the animals' mangers, the chaff on the floor and the dry bark of the beams and uprights.

Parker took his axe and knocked out the plank that was holding the ox fast. As soon as he realized he was free, the ox that was lying on his trampled fellow tried to get up.

"Hupp!" Parker said, patting the animal's neck.

Cautiously the ox drew his legs from under his heavy body and lurched forward on his forelegs. His head waved drunkenly back and forth. One of his eyes was completely closed; blood had run over it and coagulated in a black mass; his nostrils flared. For a moment he stood still, then opened his mouth and began to bellow.

"Hupp!" Parker said again, pushing the animal from behind. The ox understood what the man wanted; he tried to stand up. He raised himself a few inches above the floor, then rolled slowly over on his side. Parker saw that his left hind leg was broken; a splinter of bone showed through the skin.

Patricia had run to the house. Parker had seen her walking across the yard; after a few steps she had taken hold of her skirts and lifted them above her ankles. In front of the house she had stopped and looked at the garden, then slowly raised her hands and dropped her head until her face was hidden in them. Then Parker glanced down at the ox, and when he looked up again she was gone.

How would he tell her about the ox? He knew the animal was done for. They could never nurse it back to health, even if it was possible to do that sort of thing for an ox. They would have enough to do keeping themselves alive and saving something from the fields. Even now he was wasting too much time in the barn. He must fetch his gun and shoot the animal. Then they would put up a few pounds of meat in vinegar, hang another few pounds in the fireplace to smoke, and the horse would drag the rest across the field to a place where they could bury it. They would bury it deep enough so that the coyotes could not get at it, and deep enough so that they could forget it.

Patricia was returning across the yard with a pail of water. She ought not carry so much weight in her condition. She was leaning against the burden, so that the pail knocked against her leg and water splashed over the rim. Her face was pale and her lips compressed.

"We'll wash his eye," she said, dipping a rag into the steaming water.

The animal shrank away when she placed the hot rag on the wound. He tried to get up, struggled to a kneeling position, then again fell on his side.

Patricia looked at Albert.

"What's the matter with him?" she asked.

"I don't know." He looked down at the ground, and Patricia sensed that he was concealing something.

"I must go to the garden," he said.

They were silent for a moment, not looking at each other, pretending to be busy.

"Albert," Patricia said.

"What?"

"I saw the garden."

"Yes?"

"You mustn't be discouraged."

"No."

"It's so horrible I had to vomit."

She gazed at him, wondering whether to go on; yet she knew she had to say it before he saw for himself.

"Not a leaf will be left of all we planted, Albert. I wanted to go there and take a few cabbage heads into the house. But I can't. I just can't. It's like decaying garbage full of maggots. They're hanging in the peas and in the beans and clinging all over the cabbage; the shrubs are alive and the tomatoes have ulcers." She paused and took a deep breath. "Albert, do you believe it can affect you when you see something disgusting?" she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Because of the baby."

"Affect you?"

"So that the baby would be a monster, deformed?"

Parker shook his head and ran his hand through her hair. But he was none too sure. Once he had seen a baby with an enormous brown birthmark. Brown as a cluster of locusts; brown and so repulsive that people said the mother had taken fright at something and marked the child. Idle talk, of course, idle talk.

Patricia took his hand.

"Go now, Albert," she said.

Parker looked at the ox, who was lying on his side and snorting. Good that he had laid sacks over the other, so that Patricia need not see it. He squeezed her hand. There was time to tell her about the broken leg. To-morrow would do.

"Let him lie where he is and make poultices for him," he said. "I think he'll recover; I'm sure of it. He's such a strong beast."

Patricia nodded. Parker went slowly across the yard and disappeared behind the house.

When he returned, he found Patricia where he had left her. She had built a small fire against the cold, and placed the pail of water on two stones over the flames.

She smiled at him, and when he sat down beside her she gave him a glass of whisky. He emptied it at a draught.

"The potatoes are clear," he said. "And part of the wheatfield."

"That's good."

"To-morrow I'll build fires. Maybe we can smoke them out."

His voice was weary. The whisky warmed him; he leaned back against the wall of the barn and closed his eyes. Then he sat up straighter and laid one hand on the neck of the ox. The hide felt moist and rough.

"How is he?" he asked.

Patricia gazed into the fire. Her face was flushed and immobile; she sat rigid, as though she had fallen sleep.

"I bound up his leg," she said.

"Oh."

"I pushed the bone back into place and made a splint with a stick of wood."

"And?"

"Nothing. I'll nurse him until he's well. We can't afford to lose another ox. He ate a little and drank half a pail of water. To-morrow we'll get him back into his stall. He's a young animal. By the time the baby comes he'll be able to walk again. Do you hear me, Albert?"

Parker smiled. The wall against his back was warm, and the fire made his legs warm. Patricia's eyes were gentle and calm. He smelled the grass that was drying into hay, and the moisture of the night rising out of the pores of the earth. These things would remain. His land would remain. His house and his wife would remain.

He closed his eyes again. The last thing he saw before he fell asleep was Patricia standing up.

She bent over the ox. She took the white rag, dipped it into the pail and squeezed out the water. Then she placed the rag gently on the sick animal.

And this would remain.

The locusts descended upon Heinrich Bieber's fields as they had descended upon the fields of all the others. When night fell, the dew laid a sheath of moisture over the insects and their movements became slow and weary. They folded their wings close against their bodies and ceased to crawl. Until the last moment of wakefulness they had fed, and many a locust fell asleep with a blade of grass or the stem of a flower between its mandibles.

The Biebers sat in their dark kitchen. The baby had been feverish all day and had not fallen asleep until dusk; they did not want to wake it by lighting a lamp. They had moved their chairs close together and now they were staring toward the window. They sat stiff and erect, not touching each other, as though they were in their pew in the village

church of Lich. The window frames rattled in the wind, and gradually the pane became so clouded over that the stars were visible only as misty spots. For a long time a thin branch of Clara's apricot sapling remained visible, and the locusts upon it looked like a burden of fruit. But now it was gone, and the night seemed like any other night, except that they knew it was different.

They had laid the baby in Clara's bed. When he turned over, rustling the pillow, Clara got up and lit the lamp.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

The child held his hand over his eyes because the light blinded him. He shook his head.

Clara felt his brow. The boy liked the feeling of something cool on his skin. But it was cool only in the beginning. Then the hand felt warm again, as the linen of the pillow felt warm after you had lain in one place for a while.

"Do you want to drink?" Clara asked.

The child nodded. Through his fingers he could see his mother. He followed her with his eyes as she went to the stove, took a pot and poured milk into a glass. She put the pot back on the stove and took from the shelf a bowl of honey covered with a piece of cloth so that the flies could not get at it. Clara untied the cloth, dipped a spoon into the bowl, took it out again and whipped it around several times. She wound the ribbon of honey around the spoon, spun it until the ribbon became a thread of honey and the thread of honey a web of honey. And then the spoon was free, the honey fled into the milk and was stirred until it disappeared, making the milk yellow and sweet.

The baby sat up. He took the glass in both hands. While he drank he gazed at his mother, at her face and her neck, her blouse and finally at her hands, which she had clasped at her waist. A fly crawled around on her fingers. It must be tickling Mother, but she stood still until Michael finished and gave the glass back to her.

"Now go back to sleep," she said.

The baby lay back. He took a corner of the pillow and pushed it under his head. Pillow corners were wonderfully cool.

"Where is papa?" he asked, turning over on his side.

"He's sitting by the window."

"What is he doing?"

"Nothing."

"Is he sleeping?"

"No, he's not sleeping, Michael."

"Why not?"

"He isn't tired yet."

"Aren't you tired?"

"No, I'm not tired either."

“And the locusts?”

He was already half asleep. He was aware only that his mother had sat down on the edge of the bed with her back almost touching him, and that her body shaded his eyes.

Clara propped her elbow on her knee. She was still holding the glass in her hand; there was a little milk left in it. The glass was white and the milk yellow and lukewarm—it was fresh from the cow. Seventeen quarts the cow had given. They must remember that. The very day the locusts came the cow had given seventeen quarts. Even though she had not had time to milk her properly. There had not been time for any of the ordinary chores. They had covered the vegetables with sacks and fastened the edges with stones. They had waved red-and-white checked cloths over the rows. They had trampled locusts in the barn. They had beaten the branches of the apricot tree with sticks. They had worked until their backs hurt from bending and their arms smarted from flailing and their legs were weary from stamping.

Clara turned her head and looked at the baby. If only he was not seriously ill. It took so much of your strength when you had to fight sickness also. You thought of it all the time; you only half paid attention to everything else. And now more than ever it was necessary to have your wits about you.

Michael had closed his eyes, but she was not sure he was sleeping. His eyelids quivered. His mouth was slightly open and he looked like Heinrich. He would grow up like Heinrich, big and heavy-set and full of cares and worries. He would have a hard life; he would tremble when he sowed and be afraid when he reaped; the good and lovely things would seem like a miracle to him, like a blessing from heaven and the fulfilment of one hope among thousands.

She started when Heinrich stood up. He went to the window and brushed his hand over the misted pane. His hand left a broad strip of blackness that reflected the light of the lamp. He wiped his hand on his trousers and pressed his forehead against the glass. The putty of the window frame cracked softly. The glass was not tight. Nothing was tight, nothing secure. They themselves were not secure. For years they had been here and still they were not secure.

Heinrich turned and came toward her. He was still wearing the wooden shoes he had worn in the barn.

“Sh!” she said, lifting her finger to her lips.

Heinrich slipped out of his shoes and approached her in stockinged feet. He had thick woollen socks on his broad feet. Grey socks that she herself had knitted. Between the toes were dark sweat marks. She ought to wash to-morrow, and darn and iron the day after, and then clean and put up preserves. Every day was planned and each day followed the next and in the end it might make the whole of a good, a wonderful life.

"Is he asleep?" Heinrich asked when he was close to her.

"I don't know."

She looked at him and saw by his eyes that his thoughts were elsewhere. The Lord knew where; the Lord knew what he was thinking and brooding about. Perhaps he was despairing of this land, this land that crushed the soul out of your body before you could put a piece of bread into your mouth. Perhaps Heinrich was cursing the furrows he had drawn and the seed he had strewn; perhaps he was condemning himself for ever having come to Kansas, instead of remaining in Lich and enduring the despotic rule of the Hessian Grand Duke.

"I've thought of something, Clara," he said.

"What?" she whispered, holding her breath.

"I think I can make something that will destroy the locusts."

For a moment she seemed to be listening to the echo of his words. Then she drew a deep breath of reassurance, and smiled.

"What is it, Heinrich?" she asked, her voice like a caress.

"It's hard to explain it to you. It has a frame like a harrow, and diagonally across it I'll stretch sackcloth, and the oxen will drag it over the field. Can you see what I mean, Clara?"

"Yes, Heinrich."

"It will flatten out the stalks without breaking them. They'll straighten up again if it rains just once. Maybe God will let it rain just once."

"Of course He will let it rain."

"Maybe."

"Surely, Heinrich. Surely. You know I predicted it once before. Remember?"

"Yes."

He rubbed his hand over his eyes and shook his head. Frowning, he leaned against the big round table and gazed at the floor. Clara knew she must say something. But she was silent; she no longer had the strength; her words were like dust running through the fingers.

"It won't rain," Heinrich said. "And if it does rain, there'll be something else. The locusts will be too many or too cunning. They'll run before the machine. They'll fly out over the cloth. They'll cling to the stalks or invent some other such devilry, and in the end it will be just as bad as it is now, or a little worse."

"Heinrich."

He laid his hand on her hair. "Don't get excited," he whispered. "I'll try it, anyway. I'll try it because I have to try something. Not because I think it will work. I couldn't sleep peacefully if I didn't try it."

He picked up the table he had been leaning on and carried it to the wall. The baby sighed in his sleep and turned over. His cheeks were hot and his breathing heavy; his mouth was still open and he looked very sick.

"Heinrich," Clara said.

"Yes."

"Must you make the thing here in this room?"

"Why?"

"Because of Michael."

"Do you think it will harm him?"

"I don't know."

"But you think so?"

"Yes."

Heinrich did not reply. He stood behind the lamp, where Clara could not see him. She should have said nothing, she thought. Now he wouldn't do it. He would think it wasn't meant to be done. He would crawl into bed and during the night he would make up his mind, and to-morrow it would be all up with them.

"Heinrich," she said.

"What?"

"Couldn't you take the work into the barn?"

"No."

"Or the yard?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll have no light."

"Suppose I hold the lamp for you?"

For a while there was silence in the room. Then Heinrich approached her slowly. She was glad she could see his face. It was so much better, so much easier than speaking to him in the dark.

"Do you think he's very sick?" Heinrich asked, pointing to the baby.

"No."

"His throat's sore."

"It's nothing, Heinrich."

"Even if it was anything, there isn't a doctor for thirty miles around."

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"And if there was a doctor, I couldn't pay him."

"Heinrich!"

"And if there was a doctor who'd come for nothing, I couldn't buy medicine."

Clara took his hard, heavy hand, with its calluses at the base of the fingers, calluses where the fingers rubbed together, calluses at the joints of the fingers.

"Don't you want me to hold the lamp for you, Heinrich?"

"Huh?"

"The lamp, so that you can make the thing."

"All right."

He stood for a moment, gazing indecisively at her. He felt the cool

touch of her hand and saw his own sprawling shadow extending over the baby's bed and up the wall. How big and strong he was, and what a poor devil.

Couldn't even pay for a doctor for his child. In Lich they would have stuck him in the poorhouse. A nobody, that's what he was.

Heavy-footed, he went to the door. "I'll get the stuff," he growled. He opened the door before he realized that he was not wearing shoes. They stood in the middle of the room, wide sabots with sharp toes that looked like the prow of a ship. He picked them up. Then he left the room, and a few seconds later Clara heard him shuffling across the yard.

She got up and smoothed her skirt. Going to the stove, she poured the remaining milk in the glass back into the pot. Then she took a kerchief from the chest and tied it around her head. The baby slept soundly.

She took the lamp and crossed the room, followed by shadows that moved with her across the floor and into the centre of the darkening room. In the doorway she turned once more. She felt the wind at her back and heard the loud rustling of the fields; but inside the air was gentle and peaceful and the child's breathing was like the breath of silence.

Clara sat down on the rim of the well, placing the lamp beside her on the ground. The light cast a round yellow glow and gave forth a warmth that felt pleasant on her legs. She folded her arms around her knees and waited.

Heinrich came from the barn carrying a sawhorse and a saw. He shifted the sawhorse back and forth until it stood firm; then he went away again. He had not looked at his wife or said a word to her. After a while she heard him piling boards. Through cracks in the barn she could see the light of the candle he had lit. Now and then his shadow crossed the glow. Then the candle was blown out and she heard the shuffling clatter of his wooden shoes crossing the yard.

She stood up, took the lamp in her hand and went to meet him. The lamp did not throw its light very far, but it made it easier for him to find the way.

When she saw what he was carrying, she thought to help him. He was bent double under the burden he had loaded on his shoulders. The boards were heaped up above his head, and were so long that they touched the ground behind him.

When he did not pause, she went on ahead of him. She walked backwards, holding the lamp so that he could see the path. He panted and shuffled along with bent knees, scarcely raising his feet above the ground. When he reached the sawhorse, he dropped to the ground with the wood on top of him.

"Grab hold," he said.

Clara put the lamp on the ground and with both hands raised the boards a little, so that he could crawl out from under. The wood was

heavy; it felt rough and had a sweetish smell, the smell of wood that has lain long in a barn. She felt her hands slipping under the weight; then Heinrich's hands took hold between hers and the burden became light.

"All right," Heinrich said. Clara let go and stepped aside; then he let go and the wood thudded to the ground. They smelled the dust that rose, and the light looked for a moment as though shrouded in fog. But the wind was steady, and a moment later the dust was carried away.

Clara listened, wondering whether the noise had wakened the baby. Heinrich wiped his face with a big red handkerchief.

Hearing nothing, Clara picked up the lamp again.

"Where do you need the light, Heinrich?" she asked.

"Here," he replied, and began choosing boards.

He measured the length with a yardstick, marking the places with a pencil. Then he sawed the wood on the sawhorse and hammered the boards together on the ground. When his instrument began to take shape, it did, in fact, look like the frame of a harrow. Clara could not understand how he intended to use it. But she quietly held the lamp, and when the hammer blows seemed too loud to her, she turned her head slightly and held her breath to hear whether Michael was stirring.

The night was full of sounds, as it always was when the wind blew, brushing leaves and bending blades of grass and rustling grains of dust in the straw roof. And because there was nothing unusual in the sounds of the night, she heard the noise of the wagon from far off.

Heinrich paused in his work. He put his hands to his hips and leaned forward. Yes, it was a wagon. A wagon approaching their farm in the middle of the night, coming in the night through the locust land, and not by the main highway.

He looked at Clara. "What can he want?" he asked.

"I think he must have lost his way."

"Why should he be driving at night?"

"In a hurry."

"Maybe someone running away. Giving up this place. Maybe it's someone the locusts have done for already; someone who has starvation at his heels."

"Heinrich!"

Heinrich shrugged. He crossed the yard to his woodpile and picked out a sound club. One never knew. Maybe they ought to put out the light.

"Blow out the lamp, Clara," he called.

"Why?"

"Maybe it's the devil come to take us. Or maybe it's someone come to beg. I'm afraid of both."

Clara did not stir. Slowly Heinrich came back toward her.

"Don't you want to blow out the lamp, Clara?" he asked softly.

"No. It may be someone in need; perhaps we can help him."

"Wouldn't that be the story of the blind leading the halt?"

"No, it would be the story of the poor man who shared his last crust of bread."

The two fell silent. Now they could distinctly hear the squeaking of the wheels and the rattle of the axles; then the lights suddenly appeared. They cast a reddish glow. Two of them illuminated the canvas of a covered wagon; one hung below between the wheels. The lanterns swung back and forth; sometimes they seemed on the point of flickering out. The horses' legs were like crawling black shadows, the thud of their hoofs like the sound of wooden shoes on a village pavement.

By the time the wagon entered the yard, the Biebers were familiar with the strangers' voices. The voice of the woman was loud and hoarse and masculine; she laughed and cursed and spoke frequently to the horses. The man's voice was timid, weary and irritable; most of the time he mumbled.

"My name is Betty Maxwell," the woman said. She had been walking ahead of the horses, leading them.

"Pleased to meet you," Bieber said. "My name is Heinrich Bieber, and this is my wife, Clara."

"Proud to meet you," said the man in the wagon. "My name is Homer Maxwell."

"He's my husband," Betty said. Her face was tanned and the scar over her eye was red and glossy. She stood squarely, arms akimbo, the reins clenched in her fists.

"What can we do for you?" Bieber asked.

"We've lost our way. You can believe me we were glad to see your light. We'd like to ask you for a bed for the night and something to warm our stomachs."

"We have no bed."

"And we have nothing to eat," Clara added.

"We have locusts in the land," Heinrich said.

"And a sick baby," Clara whispered.

"Damn," the woman said. She rubbed her sleeve over her forehead. "You have your troubles. Everyone has the locusts, and about the food, we only meant could we use your stove; we've brought all we need. But the baby . . ."

She inspected Clara from top to toe. She was a big, strong woman, with a heavy body and firm carriage. "Hang on to the reins," she said to the man in the wagon. Then turning to Clara, she said, "Let me take a look at the baby."

Clara glanced at Heinrich. She was tired and unable to think clearly. Maybe Providence had sent this woman; maybe the devil; or else it was just chance that she had happened by at this moment. How was one to know?

"It won't cost you anything and there's no obligation," Betty said.

There was a silence. Betty looked around. "Anyway, what are you two doing here in the middle of the night?" she asked.

"Making something to get rid of the locusts," Heinrich said softly. He felt his face flush.

"There isn't anything can do that."

"I don't know. I figured it out myself."

Betty laughed. Her laughter was coarse and hearty; as she laughed she opened her mouth so that her strong yellow teeth could be seen.

"Pardon me," she said. "But, by God, it's so funny and so sad. You're making a wooden frame with a sail, and you're going to draw it over your fields. The locusts will bang against the sail and slip into a box, and once they're in you'll crush them or drown them in kerosene or some other poison. Is that it?"

Heinrich nodded.

"Son of Adam," Betty said gravely, her voice low and urgent, "save your strength and your wood and nails and sacks. For a month I've been travelling through locust country. Out of every ten farms there's someone on three of them who invents something. And every time the locusts are smarter. And every time there are too many of them. Either the wind blows in the wrong direction, or it rains too soon or too late—it's always something, but all the schemes fail."

She looked at Heinrich out of the corner of her eyes. There was something of the crouching beast of prey in her eyes, and when she saw him nod, she placed her hand on his shoulder. "You must remember that the locusts live only a single year. But you'll be here next year as well. There'll be another harvest. The soil isn't destroyed; the cows won't be killed and the oxen won't be eaten." She turned toward Clara. "Come, let's see how the baby is."

Clara stood still, gazing at her. She hated this woman. She hated her loud laughter and her broad shoulders and her scarred face. She hated the strength that radiated from her; it made one feel small and silly. Above all, she hated her stupid talk that was robbing Heinrich of his last hope.

She felt Heinrich looking at her.

"It's very nice of you," she said, "but I don't want to disturb the baby to-night."

"As you like," Betty replied sharply. She shrugged. "I brought up four brothers and sisters, so I know a little about taking care of kids. I didn't mean anything by it."

"I didn't mean to offend you," Clara said.

The man in the wagon bent forward. It was the first time the Biebers had an opportunity to see his face. It was a sallow face, with a sharp nose and small, mousy eyes.

"Let's go on, Betty," he said.

"Is there a village near by?" Betty asked. "Maybe we can find someone who'll let us lay a mattress on the floor and boil hot water for tea. My God, what is this country coming to!"

"There's no village anywhere in the neighbourhood," Clara said. "The nearest is Gnadenau, but you can't make it there with the wagon unless you go a long, roundabout way." She spoke in a quiet, friendly voice, as though unaware of the woman's reproaches.

"Look here," Betty whispered, "my husband is sick. It's like poison to him when he has to stay out in the open. I've been shy to tell you, because he doesn't want others to know. If you can put him up, I can just as well sleep in the wagon."

Heinrich nodded. "Yes, we can do that; sure."

"But we don't have anything to eat," Clara said again.

Betty went to a box tied at the back of the wagon. "We have everything," she called out. Clara could see her rummaging in the box. She heard bottles ringing against one another. Then the woman came back with a slab of bacon that was almost too heavy for her to hold.

"All right?" she asked.

Clara did not answer. All at once she felt terribly tired. It was very late. She closed her eyes. She smelled the odour of the smoked meat, mingled with the fragrance of the night and of the wind that came out of the darkness. Out of the darkness where the locusts slept, awaiting the return of the sun.

The man clambered slowly down from the wagon. He was small and thin, and there was something about him that reminded Clara of a spider. As soon as he was down, he leaned against the wagon wheel and began rubbing his hands. His wife unhitched the horses and led them behind the house. Then she returned and took a bag of oats from the interior of the wagon. She poured some of the oats into a bucket, gripped the bucket firmly in her big hands and carried it to the horses.

Heinrich gathered up his tools and piled the wood. He folded the sackcloth into a small heap and pocketed the nails he was able to find in the gloom.

When he had finished he took the lamp from Clara's hands. Carrying it, he walked a few steps toward the door of the house. Then he turned.

Clara, following him, smiled faintly and inclined her head. Behind her came the little man, still rubbing his hands, and behind him was the barnyard, which was dark because the woman had put out the wagon lights.

Lydia arose toward dawn and dressed. She had not slept at all. She had lain still, listening to the wind roaring around the house and growing cold with fright when a leaf fluttered against the window.

The fright had taken a peculiar hold upon her body. Her heart seemed to stop; at the same time there had been an unbearable tension of expectation within her, and she had sat up and listened with open mouth. Would it come now, the inconceivable, annihilating terror that would make an end of all of them? Was the morrow to be the day the Bible proclaimed? Were the locusts in Kansas the locusts of the Scriptures?

She had seen with her own eyes how it began. The creatures had descended so thickly upon the earth that one had to wade in them. They had settled in the trees and on the fields, and wherever one set foot they lay in knots and heaps and clusters.

The older Mennonites had remained calm. They had stroked their beards and spoken of locust times in the Crimea. They had recalled what the people had done then to destroy the creatures, and they had smiled forbearingly at the youths who ran excitedly through the village, behaving as though the world was coming to an end. It had been different in the old days, they admitted. Then they were at home; their barns and bins were full and their purses plump, whereas now they were in new country. Their roots had not yet grown deep, and so a locust swarm was worse than it had formerly been just as it is worse when the storm strikes a tree that is newly set out, or when the wolf devours a man's one sheep than when he wantonly murders a hundred out of a thousand. Just as it is harder for a stupid man to defend himself against a dog than for a wise man against a lion.

Lydia shook her head. How blind they were, all of them, old and young. Whom God wishes to destroy . . . They had not seen that these locusts were not like the locusts of the Crimea. These had not begun to feed as soon as they settled down. They had remained still, as though waiting for an order. It had been as though they were obeying a commandment that had nothing to do with them and their own lives. They were instruments, waiting for the Lord to take them in hand.

Lydia had finished dressing. She went to the door, found the latch in the darkness and pressed gently on it. But the door did not open; she could not get out. She lit a candle and shielded the flame with her hand. Then she looked for the key. It must be somewhere; she must get out. She must observe the locusts, and she must pray. One had to have the sky above when one prayed; not this heavy straw roof that weighed down the air and made it hard to breathe.

She took a chair and clambered up to the high window, though she knew she could not open it. It was fixed firmly in the wall, small square panes of glass set in lead frames. Her father had screwed it in tightly when he built the house; it was never intended to open. She pressed her hand against the glass. It was cool to the touch and yielded slightly. The edges creaked, but the glass held. It was a good, strong window that did not rattle when the wind blew.

She stepped down from the chair. She thought she heard something stirring in the house. Quickly, she blew out the candle and slipped under the covers. After a while the door of her parents' room was opened and she heard her father's tread. So silent was the house that she heard him strike a match; then came the faint tinkle of the glass chimney as he lifted it to light the lantern.

Then the flow of light entered her window and moved across the ceiling. Father was walking back and forth, as if searching for something. Perhaps he had realized there was something strange about the locusts; perhaps he wanted to see whether they had begun to feed.

Again Lydia stood on the chair. Yes, there he was kneeling on the ground, in his nightshirt and trousers, with the lantern beside him. He was looking at the locusts. He plucked them out of the grass with the tips of his fingers, held them to the light and bent forward until his eyes almost touched them. Then he wiped his hand on his trousers, walked forward a few steps and knelt again. Again and again he picked up locusts and examined them. Again and again.

Finally he took the lantern and returned to the house. He stopped in front of Lydia's door. He must be listening, wondering whether she was asleep. Wondering whether she could sleep, she who was guilty before them all for what had come and was to come; she who had sinned more than all the others, and who was nevertheless chosen from among all the women to foreknow what impended.

How long she had known! The Lord had revealed it to her that day in Topeka. He had made it physically plain to her; a child would have understood. But grown-ups are often more unseeing than a child. She had seen the locusts and heard them; they had crawled on her body and in her hair and into the depths of her being, but she had not found words to interpret the signs of the Lord. She had believed the foolish stories they had told her, that she was sick, that she had nervous fever. She had believed them as she would have believed them had they told her she had whooping cough. She had not spoken aloud what she knew. Why had God revealed it to her if she was not to proclaim it? Did the Lord expect silence from His prophets?

She crept back to bed. She heard her father return to his room, and then came his voice, even and gentle, sounding through the house as it always did when he read aloud from the Bible. She wondered whether he had found the passage that she knew by heart: "And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads."

She closed her eyes. The breaking dawn would be the dawn of the last

day. She had confessed her sin. She would harbour no secret shame when she came before the face of the Lord.

She had gone to the conference of the men. For a while she had listened at the window, hearing them propose methods of annihilating the locusts. Then she had gone in. When she opened the door the men had looked at her with grave and composed faces, because they did not yet know that these were not the Rocky Mountain locusts, but the locusts of the Apocalypse.

She had sensed that they were smiling when she began to speak. But she had felt strong because she knew what they did not know. And she had said at once that her story about Parker was untrue. She spoke, and listened to words that came out of her mouth as though they were not her own words, and as though the mouth that spoke them was not her own.

"But what I said was not an ordinary, ugly lie, and my heart had no thought of slander. Something took hold of me that cannot be expressed. It came upon me and bore me down as the weight of ice bears down the branches of an oak; and I cannot explain it, no more than I can the locusts in Topeka, which really came, although no one but myself saw them."

She had wanted to add that God had forgiven her, for had He not sent the swarm before the men could reach Parker's; but they had not let her finish. Her father had stood up and taken her home. He had not said a word to her, although Lydia had walked calm and smiling at his side. She had eaten and prayed with her parents in the evening; and had been happy that it was all over. Now there was no sin upon her head; her own life would end with the end of the whole world.

When it was light, someone came and thrust a key into the lock. Lydia pretended she was sleeping. When she saw her mother she sat up.

"Why are you dressed?" Caroline Miller asked.

"I wanted to go out."

"Where?"

"I don't know. It felt terribly close in here."

"Get up."

"All right."

Lydia looked at her mother. "To-day is a good day," she said.

"Lydia!"

"The day of the Fifth Angel."

"Do not sin, Lydia! Look around and see what the locusts are doing to us. Look at the trees and the garden and the flowers."

"I know. They are everywhere. They cover the whole land, hanging to the trees, not moving, waiting."

"Not moving?"

"No. They will spare the green things. They do not care for the plants

and the innocent grass. These are different, Mother, altogether different."

"How so?"

"Didn't you see it at once last night? The wind brought them and they looked like smoke, as the Revelation tells us. They covered the earth but they did not feed. They sat on the trees, but they did not eat. They clung to the flowers, but they did not devour them."

Caroline leaned back against the frame of the door. She felt weary, although the day had not yet begun. The air was fresh and fragrant, the wind moderate, and the morning light serene. It was good that all things were as sober and real to-day as they were every day that God created. The locusts were the same, with their little heads and small eyes and ugly mandibles; the wind carried them from the mountains as it had always done when it was time for the locusts. It was good that these were ordinary locusts that devoured the wheat and corn and oats and cabbage, and all things green; not the locusts that were promised on the Day of Judgment.

"What are you thinking about, Mother?" Lydia asked.

Caroline sat down on the box beside the door. She sat upright and leaned her head against the wall. Her eyes grew narrow and the wrinkles in her face became like dark lines of lead as she spoke.

"Listen to me, Lydia," she said. "The locusts are feeding. They're eating our corn, our barley, our grass, everything that we've planted. They're eating all the green things God has created, and if we don't defend ourselves they'll eat the roof over our heads and the ground under our feet."

Lydia's contented smile froze on her lips. It was still there, but she did not know; it remained in her face, contrasting oddly with her wide, horrified and unbelieving eyes. She opened her mouth to speak.

"Don't interrupt me," her mother went on. "I have no time for speeches. This is something we all have to fight against as we would fight fire or flood. It's something we can conquer if we have enough workers, enough hands. It can be destroyed if you join your strength and your will to mine, and our strength to father's, and the strength of all three to that of the community. It can be overcome if we put together all the power in our minds and make one mind that will be stronger and more cunning than the brain of the locusts."

Again Lydia made an effort to speak.

"I've not finished yet, Lydia." She lowered her eyes and continued in a whisper. "You've brought shame upon us, and if God had not intervened you might have a murder and more on your conscience. Nevertheless, I come to you with a plea. I beg you, as though I was the worst and meanest person in the world; I give up all my dignity and forget all my pride, and I implore you not to fail us. We need your strength, Lydia. Your hands, your arms, muscles and legs. Your will,

your mind. And if you don't give these things to us, we're lost. There are only two of us, your father and I. We have nothing in our bins, nothing saved. All we have is land, and all we have of the land is this harvest."

She stood up and went out with head erect, looking straight before her. Through the open door came a pale-rose light and the voices of men in the street.

Lydia went out. The landscape was still shadowy and dew-laden, and the colours were pallid. She still heard the voices of the men, and from the houses on the street sounded the rattling of plates that the housewives were placing on tables. She shivered in the cold wind.

Slowly, she walked around the house, her hand brushing against the wall, which was cool and wet and repulsive. Her feet soon became wet from the thick dew that hung in the grass.

The locusts seemed to have been unable to wait for full daylight. They disregarded the dew on their wings and the cool of the night in their legs. They crawled. They resembled mud oozing out of the earth; they were like tangled heaps of worms, and like great centipedes lying on their backs. The noise of their mandibles was unmistakable. As Lydia watched she could see the lettuce stirring. Slowly each leaf leaned outward, then fell to the ground. Soon nothing was left but the ribs, and often these were consumed too.

Apparently not all of them were able to move. Many could not crawl because the wind had not yet dried them sufficiently. They sat stretching their legs and waiting. They were as hungry as the others, just as eager to fill their bellies, and intoxicated by the odour of the garden. They were compelled to feel the others crawling over them and hear the others chewing; they must smell the yellow spittle dripping out of the others' mouths and the excrement from their abdomens; yet they themselves had to sit motionless and wait. But with every second that the wind blew thousands more came to life, and every minute meant numberless increases in the army of those that were feeding.

Lydia's expression changed. Her staring eyes closed to small slits, and folds formed on her forehead and around her mouth. She stood stolid, her hands brushing along her thighs up to her broad hips. She leaned forward and drew her shoulders high; it was strange to see how, all at once, she bore a remarkable resemblance to her father.

Then she bent down and picked up a cluster of locusts. The stiff little legs thrust against her palm. She clenched her fist so tight that her knuckles hurt. When she relaxed it again, she felt some of the locusts still kicking; the pressure had not reached them. With the ball of her other hand she pressed against the clenched fist, at the same time opening her fingers. Crackling, the armoured thorax and the heads and wings of the animals were crushed. The broken bodies fell to the ground,

while fragments of legs and wings clung to her moist palm. Her palm was shiny and greasy from the exudations of the locusts' gut.

These were the locusts she had always known. They were small and repulsive and cunning; but one could crush them and trample them to death. They were no more than an ordinary plague; a disgusting swarm of insects that gnawed and ate and crawled and that one day would die and decay. These were but the offal of creation, the lowest and most contemptible of creatures. Mother was right; these were not the locusts of the Bible, of whom it is written: "And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men."

No, this was not the day she had foreseen. This was an ordinary day of work, a day like any other, except that on this day they had more to do than on most days. This day they needed all the hands they could muster, and twice twenty-four hours. But they would do it; they would not allow themselves to be eaten out of house and home by this living ordure. There were things to do, ways to turn the corn they devoured into ashes in their hungry maws.

Lydia ran back into the house. Her mother was in the kitchen, her father in the barn. The table was set, and the room was redolent with the smell of the quick bread her mother was baking.

"Mother!" Lydia exclaimed.

Caroline turned. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"What are we waiting for?"

"What do you mean, waiting?"

"Why aren't we outside? This isn't what I thought. This isn't the day that was prophesied, the day that will come. They're just ordinary locusts, ugly worms that you can crush between two fingers." She paused and rubbed her hands together, trying to wipe away the stickiness she still felt. Then she went on, with bright eyes and flushed face: "We mustn't wait. They've started to feed. They'll be finished by night-fall if we don't do something. But we will, we must do something; we must fight them. We've bought our land with our hard-earned money; we didn't get it for nothing. We can't lose it because of an ugly swarm of locusts. We can't. We can't just give up, Mother. We can't."

Caroline walked slowly toward the girl, dismayed by the hysteria in Lydia's voice. She heard her husband walking across the yard, and the sound was a relief to her. She was glad she would no longer be alone with her poor girl whose mind was wandering. That was it, her mind was wandering. God of righteousness, her daughter's mind was wandering . . .

The words ran like a refrain in her head; she stood still until she heard Martin set down the milk pails in the parlour, and then she ran past the girl, took him by the arm and drew him into a corner.

"She's gone crazy," she whispered. "Martin, our girl has gone crazy."

Miller was on the point of wiping the sweat from his face. Instead he brought the handkerchief to his mouth. He looked at his wife, and an expression of sombre, gentle pity came over his controlled features.

"I've thought so for a long time, Caroline," he whispered, "but I've never said it to you, and I don't like you to say it to me, for neither of us knows. She behaves sometimes as though her reason was gone; but then again I imagine it's something else. I don't think we ought to try to find out. We ought to act as though she's healthy. I'm afraid we'll really make her sick if we say she's sick."

He turned toward Lydia, who had come into the room. "Let us have breakfast, Lydia," he said. "We have a hard day before us, and we must think of nothing but the things we have to do. Yesterday is the past."

He went to the table and sat down. The two women served bread and groats and butter and cheese and the three began to eat. They spoke no more than on other days.

When they had finished, Miller said grace and then they got up. "We'll begin with the garden," he said.

"What will we do?" Caroline asked.

"I've considered what we want to save. The wheat is lost, I think, and so are the oats and part of the corn. We'll save the rest if we can."

They went to the garden, the women with leaf rakes and Miller with a spade. In the centre of the vegetable garden he began digging a hole. The women started at the corners and moved toward the centre, brushing the rakes over the plants. They brushed carefully, so as not to injure the leaves; but between the rows they whirled their rakes as if they were sweeping a room. The dust flew up, and when the sun rose there seemed to be a fiery cloud hanging over the Millers' garden. A few of the locusts began flying, but most of them remained on the ground, and after only a few minutes the women had thick clusters of locusts in front of them, which they slowly and steadily swept toward the hole. The heap of locusts was grey, and often it was hardly visible because the dust was so thick. The dust settled on the locusts, paling their brown and green bodies until they looked like leaves on a busy street.

The hole Miller was digging grew steadily deeper. He wanted it deep enough so that only his head would be above ground. It must be like a grave. At first it had been easy breaking through the earth, but then the ground became harder and the dust that hovered everywhere made breathing hard. But the dust was important. It smothered the locusts. It made them unable to fly, transformed them into a crawling heap of refuse. If it had not been for the dust, the women would have had to pour water repeatedly on the growing heap, and the work would have been so much the harder. Even as it was, it was uncertain what good this work would do if they were unable to keep away the locusts of the

surrounding fields. In any case there would be many remaining, and a large part of the vegetable garden would be devoured.

Miller glanced over at Lydia. She was working calmly and well, almost like a man. With her wooden shoes she trampled the locusts that escaped her rake. Her face was grave and her lips tightly compressed; if it had not been for all that passed recently he would be proud of her. Now and then she picked a locust from her blouse or skirt and squeezed it between her fingers, and once she wiped her face with her sleeve. But otherwise she did not pause; her rake swept over the ground and brushed over the leaves and steadily she pushed along the mound of locusts and dust.

Miller realized that the women were working more quickly than he. He dug faster. The hole was narrow, making it hard for him to raise the spade between himself and the wall of earth. It smelled mouldy, and now and again he came across half-rotted roots. Thousands of years of decaying vegetation had made this soil and given it its strength and fertility. Was all this so that the locusts would eat the crops it bore; so that their eggs would infest this land for all time, rendering it unfit for tillage?

He clambered out of the hole. It was not nearly deep enough, but he had no time. There should have been four or five of them at work here. But now he must clear away the earth he had shovelled up, so that there would be a path for the sweepers. The women were close now. Their horrid heap of sweepings reached up to their knees; it was at least a yard wide and four yards long. It was a miracle they were still able to move this mass forward, and that they were able to sweep it down the rows of cabbages without injuring the plants.

Lydia looked up when her father went back into the house. She was not tired. She felt strong and indefatigable; how had she ever thought these filthy little creatures were the locusts of God? Who could fear these miserable, ugly insects that obeyed the command of a rake as though they were no more than dust or leaves? How could one think them intelligent when they all ran in the direction she wanted them to go; when the mound moved toward the hole more of its own accord than because she pushed it. It would take more than these evil-smelling beasts to drive Mennonites from their land. Even though they were not yet firmly rooted in this soil; even though they had been here so short a time.

Miller returned carrying the kerosene can. He called out something to Caroline that Lydia did not understand. But her mother nodded and looked at Lydia, and when the two women's eyes met, they smiled. Life went on and nothing was lost, so long as one did not admit defeat and so long as the Lord was with one.

Miller cleared the path for the locusts. He saw there were too many of

them, and so he ran back into the house and fetched sacks. With the shovel he began filling the sacks from the crawling heap of insects. He fixed a pointed stick into the ground and used it to hold open one end of the mouth of the sack. With his left hand he held the other end and shovelled as well as he could with his right, pouring the mixture of dust and leaves and twigs and locusts adroitly into the sack. As soon as a sack was filled, he tied it and placed it to one side. His clothes were all grey, his face smeared, but he went on working as though he was filling sacks with wheat or oats.

Meanwhile Lydia had approached the pit and begun sweeping locusts into the opening her father had made in the heap of earth. There was nowhere else to sweep them, but she saw with despair that the sides of the locust heap were beginning to break out in all directions. She could not be everywhere at once; it would take six hands to control the edges. The hole should have been bigger. But it took time to dig a real pit. Hours, for one large as a grave. Many hours.

She ran to the sides and swept the insects toward the centre. She tried making a small hill out of them, a high, narrow mound that she could control and gradually push them into the pit.

But she could not. The locusts would not give her the time she needed. They rolled and tumbled and crawled toward one side when she was on the other. More and more of them began to fly. This sweeping back and forth brushed the dust from their wings. Buzzing incessantly, they flew past her back into the garden, back to the dusty, ruffled lettuce plants and cabbage and spinach. She must do something quickly; something to gain a few minutes so that she could dispose of the central mound. She thought of the sacks. She would lose ten or fifteen seconds if she ran for the sacks, but then she could control them. The little pile of sacks lay beside her father. She must have three or four. She ran. When Miller saw her coming, he knew at once what she wanted. He bent down and threw a bundle of sacks to her. She raced back. It had been but a few steps, yet the mound had diminished. It was scattering in all directions, dissolving as the insects sensed that the rake was no longer behind them.

Lydia took up the rake and began sweeping furiously. She paid no attention to the plants or to the dust she was raising, which was so thick it made her cough. She spat. Where her spittle fell the locusts became quiet. If only she had water. Water could have saved everything. Why hadn't father thought of it? Did he know about it?

When she had one side of the mound under control again, she laid a sack across it. She ought to have something to weight its ends, but there were no stones in a Mennonite's garden; and the sack would not hold the creatures long. But perhaps long enough for her to take care of the opposite side. She crossed and again began sweeping madly. When she had almost finished, her father came over. She had done it. She had

been more cunning than the creatures; stronger and faster; they had not outwitted her. She began to work more calmly again, with slow, firm, thorough motions. Now she had a little time; she could afford to be thorough.

Her mother had swept the last remaining locusts on her side into the pit; now she came to help Lydia. The work went faster. Many of the locusts were already in the pit. It was half-filled; and they would not be able to empty many from the sacks. All the rest were in the billowing burlap bags, which gave no hint of their contents. But when it was quiet they could hear the insects crawling inside, and here and there a twig of a locust leg peeped through the weave.

Miller emptied the sacks until the pit was almost brimful. Then he took the can and poured kerosene into the hole. He waited a while until the oil had trickled deep down. The top layer became dark and gleaming. The creatures were moving sluggishly now. The smell was horrible; Lydia walked around the pit to the side where she would have the fire in front of her and the wind at her back.

Miller bent down and lit a match. The flame took hold greedily on the kerosene, and then the locusts' bodies began to crackle. The horny parts burned first; then the fire attacked their soft abdomens. There was a sharp hissing, like the sound of water falling on a hot stove. The sound began at low pitch, then grew louder and higher; it reminded Lydia of the sound wet oak chunks make when they are put in the fireplace. The air was filled with a peculiar, sweetish smell. Gradually the contents of the pit shrank. The sides were coal-black now. When the flames, too, shrunk, Miller began throwing in dry brushwood. Again the flames leaped over the rim, and Miller emptied the rest of the bags into the hole. He poured carefully, so as not to smother the fire. It took time, but finally the last of the bags was emptied. The hole still smoked and hummed. Perhaps the lowest levels of locusts were still alive, but it did not matter. They filled the hole again and looked around. If they had time in the evening they would come again and go through the rows once more, trampling some of the remaining locusts. But it was not important; that would be something done "just to make sure."

Now, in this breathing spell, they saw for the first time that fires were burning in all the gardens. It was a primitive method of destroying locusts, and they knew better ones. But when one begins at the beginning in a country, almost everything must begin at the beginning. When one went to town for boughten things, one did not think of hopper dosers or poisons; one defended oneself as one's parents and grandparents had done. Miller remembered a tale his father had often told him; that in 1825 Czar Alexander had sent an army of thirty thousand men, armed with sacks and shovels, into the region between Odessa and the Crimea to destroy the locusts. They must have fought somewhat as he and his

were fighting now in Kansas. The only difference between then and now was that the soldiers had done more damage than the locusts.

The Miller family followed the wagon trail to their cornfield. The women carried their rakes and sacks, Miller the spades and shovels, and they greeted the other settlers in their fields and gardens. For the first time, Lydia felt that she belonged to them.

The cornfield extended over the brow of a hill. To the right of it was Schermer's wheat, and to the left Kettler's meadow. Schermer had begun cutting his field; the locust swarm had settled in only half and he was trying to save the other half. He intended to burn the scythed wheat, and the locusts along with it. His father had begun digging a trench to keep the flames and the insects from the healthy part of the field. The old man worked without once looking up; beside him stood Schermer's mother, now and again trampling clusters of locusts and rubbing her feet over them until nothing was left but legs and wings and a greasy dough.

No one was working in the Kettlers' meadow. It was obviously lost. Already it had been so badly stripped that nothing but the woody stems remained, and some prairie grass that the locusts had disdained. They would soon desert the mowing for better food; perhaps it was foolish or Miller not to give up the cornfield. He still had potatoes to take care of, and tomatoes, peas, squash and melons.

Schermer looked up when he saw the three coming. He stopped his work for a moment, resting the scythe on the ground. His father worked on as though alone.

"Nothing much to do," Schermer called out.

"There's nothing worse than not trying," Miller replied.

Schermer's mother turned. When she saw Lydia she smiled pleasantly and called out, "God bless you, girl."

"God bless you, sister," Lydia replied, and walked on into the cornfield. The plants were not yet high, but they stood close together and Lydia felt them brush against her hips as she walked through the field. She heard Schermer beginning again to cut his wheat; no one was thinking of what had been.

The cornfield was worse than it had been the night before, when Miller had inspected it. It was a shame to destroy immature plants, and who knew whether it would help at all?

"What do you think?" her father asked Lydia.

"I don't know."

"It's hard."

"Yes."

"Perhaps we ought to do something else. We have only one day. What we don't save to-day will be lost to-morrow."

Lydia stood still and looked toward Schermer's field. Her father was

right. It was foolish to worry about the corn. In the meanwhile the locusts would eat what they might have saved, and that was little enough as it was.

Schermer had stopped cutting again. He was leaning against the scythe and gazing steadily in their direction. His giant frame stood outlined against the bright sky, and the air was so clear that it seemed to Lydia she could make out his features and every movement of his muscles. Now his father, too, stopped and watched; the two seemed to be trying to read Miller's eyes. They stood so still they seemed to be holding their breath and waiting with constricted hearts.

Suddenly Lydia realized why. For the Schermers everything depended on what the Millers did. The Schermers had only this one wheatfield. This was their bread. They had nothing in the barn, not even their hay. They owned only one cow and one ox; and if the Millers did not fight for their corn, the Schermers could not save their wheat. That was it; that was why they were not working, why they were waiting and holding their breath. That was why the old man had taken his hat off and folded his hands over it as though in prayer. This was what depended on the corn, and she alone knew it.

Lydia clenched her fists around a bundle of cornstalks. She felt the small ears under the half-devoured husk, gripped hard and began to pull. She stretched her arms and braced her feet against the ground; her muscles tensed, and with a sucking sound the roots came loose.

"It's easy," she said, looking around at her father.

Miller shook his head. It was against all reason to try to save this field. But when he saw Caroline smiling, he shrugged and he, too, began tugging cornstalks out of the ground.

Lydia saw after working only a few minutes that it was lost labour. The locusts that fell to the ground began to crawl. As yet they crawled in no definite direction, but Lydia knew that before long they would make for the wheat. She began trampling all the locusts within reach. Her big, hard hands grasped and tore the stalks, and as she moved along a row she trod heavily with her wooden shoes on the fallen stalks, with their sheaths of locusts.

"We have no time to wait until it dries and we can burn it," she explained.

When she came to the end of the field, near the Schermers, she glanced surreptitiously over at them. They were working again with composed faces and strong, even movements; and Schermer's mother, who was too ill for hard work, was raking the stalks apart so that the sun would dry them.

Lydia's mother was the first to notice the tenuous cloud that hung in the sky to the west. She looked closely at it, but she could make out nothing but shimmering darts of silver. Perhaps she was mistaken; it might be the heat and the strain, her weariness and the sleepless night.

When she lifted her hand to her eyes, Martin, too, looked up. When he saw the cloud, he came slowly to her side.

"Another swarm," he said softly.

"Do you think so?" Caroline whispered.

"Yes."

"Over us?"

"Over the whole land."

"And?"

"No and. We must let it settle. And when it does settle, may God help us."

"Amen."

Lydia appeared at their side. Her eyes were narrowed, there was a fold over her nose and her face was sweated and dirty. She stood motionless between them and gazed at the thin silver cloud.

There was silence all around them, except for Schermer's scythe, his father's spade, and the wind.

After a while there was no sound but that of the wind.

Parker had arisen long before daybreak. The fire had almost burned out; Patricia was still asleep. She had wrapped herself in a horse blanket and only her face was visible. The ox lay still, but when Parker approached him quietly he raised his head and his eyes gleamed moistly in the weak glow of the fire.

Parker lit a lantern. The cow's hide reflected the light softly; behind her the floor glistened with moisture. The cow was the colour of a ripe cornfield. Her bag was swollen, but it was not yet time to milk her. Patricia would do that when she woke. She would get a little less milk than he, but what did that matter to-day?

The horse's shadow was darkly visible in the corner. It was a rather scrawny nag; Parker was convinced he had been cheated when he bought it. But now they were lucky to have it.

He took it by the halter and led it to the front of the barn. As he passed he took the heavy harness from the wall. The horse stood still while he threw it on.

Parker hitched the horse to the hay wagon; then he returned to the barn with his lantern and began gathering all the straw and bits of wood he could find. There was not much, but it would do to make handsome fires, big enough so that the green stuff he threw on would not smother them, but would smoke heavily. If he was skilful, the smoke might drive away the locusts; if it failed, nothing much was lost.

Patricia appeared at his side just as he was finishing. He kissed her. Her hair smelled of smoke; her skin was warm and slightly perspired, as it always was when she woke in the morning.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Well, I think I had a dream. I think I dreamed of Ginzburger."

"Oh."

"But I don't remember what it was." She yawned. "Where are you going, Albert?"

"To the wheatfield."

"What are you going to do?"

"I think I can smoke the things out."

"Yes."

"Maybe they'll just drop when they smell the smoke."

"Yes." She shivered. She patted the horse's neck and felt his hair, which was like flax. She wished Albert would stay with her a few minutes. It was depressing to be alone with a dead ox and a sick one, with the locusts around the house, and not knowing where it would all end.

"I'll milk later," she said.

"Do. I'll be back soon."

"And I'll look after the ox."

"Yes."

"And when you come I'll have breakfast ready. Bacon and eggs if you like."

"No," Parker said, shaking his head soberly. "I think that's out for a while. And we'd better begin right away. It's so important for us to keep our land, so much more important than bacon and eggs." He looked at her. In the dim light he could not see her too clearly, and because she had lowered her eyes she seemed on the point of falling asleep again. She was so small and frail, standing beside him and the wagon, and the night around her seemed unending. How terribly lonesome it must be for her. What a miserable life she had. Was it really so important for them to keep the land?

Parker picked up the reins. The horse lifted its head.

"Albert," Patricia said.

"What?"

"You're right about the bacon and eggs. We'll eat dry bread if we must. Don't worry about our losing the land. I just thought of it because to-day will be such a hard day."

Parker rubbed his hand over the stubble of his chin. He took a deep breath, feeling how his ribs tightened the cloth of his shirt. It was a rotten life, this life of theirs. Their bins were empty, there was no money in the house, and the locusts had taken possession of their fields. Still, it was a good life; God knows, it was a good life.

He drove out to the wheatfield. It was still dark when he arrived. The horse had walked slowly, with creaking harness, its hoofs alternately soft and loud as they passed from grass to hard ground and back to grass again.

Parker tied the reins to the wagon and began making small piles of

straw and wood. He wanted to build a fire about every twenty feet. This was the west side of the field; the wind would carry the smoke over the wheat. Lantern in hand, he went to the side where the hill began. He filled a basket with beech leaves, fern, nettles and prairie grass. The contents of his basket smelled green and fresh. Everything was moist; Parker's hands were soon dripping wet. When he pulled out the plants, he often felt clusters of locusts; he would grip harder and crush them, and after a while his hands had the unpleasant odour of their mealy abdomens.

When the sky began to grey, he lit the fires. Carefully, so as not to smother them, he threw the green things into the flames, and the wind picked up the smoke as he had hoped and bore it in long streamers over the wheat.

He began walking in the wheatfield. Close to the fires he could scarcely keep his eyes open, but deeper in the field the smoke was only a faint fragrance, reminiscent of harvest fires. He recalled the days when he was still prospecting for gold and had smelled this faint fragrance coming from farmers' potato fields. A little later he had always heard the ringing of a bell, and he had said to himself that now the farmer's quiet day was over.

He could see that he would not succeed in smoking out the locusts. The smoke was not thick enough. It rose into the air too quickly, hovered bannerlike over the wheat, then rose higher and dissolved. Perhaps Bieber and the Mennonites, and whoever else lived in the neighbourhood, would catch the faint fragrance of his fires and think sadly of harvest-time.

Parker scattered the fires and trampled them out. The ground was black and hot in the places where they had been, and for a while it continued to smoke. Gradually it would grow cold, but the smell of burning would linger for a long time.

In the meantime full day had dawned. Parker clambered on to the wagon, untied the reins and drove home. He must get the sick ox back into its stall and he must bury the other. He and Patricia must consider what else they could do. He could not think it out alone. Alone he could do nothing but curse, and that was not much help. He glanced at the horse just as it raised its tail and complacently let a number of brownish-yellow spheres fall to the ground behind it. In the distance he saw his house, with bluish smoke rising from the chimney. He saw his fields, already ripening; the corn with swelling ears, the beets showing a little above the ground, and the squash like small green bags. He saw the fruitfulness of his land, lying broad and blessed in the sun.

He shook his head and began cursing again. He was still reviling the locusts when he rode into the farmyard. Patricia knew by his expression that the fires had failed.

"The cow gave sixteen quarts," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"And I think the ox is much better. He ate a lot of fodder."

"Hm."

Parker unhitched the horse. He put fodder in its manger, and then he and Patricia went to the house and sat down for breakfast. They ate bread, dipping it in warm milk, and did not talk. They stared into space and chewed with open mouths, their arms on the table around the plates; they ate and ate until there was nothing left on the table.

"Do you want more?" Patricia asked.

"No, thanks. I have to take care of both the oxen now. But I'll be damned if I know what to do next. The devil take me if I know what a farmer does about locusts."

"I think, if we don't know anything else to do, we can trample them."

"What?"

"Don't you think so? We'll take a small patch that we want to save. Not a big field; just a small patch, where we can trample them all. Isn't that better than doing nothing?"

Parker nodded. It would be good to step on the damned things. Even if it did not help. It would relieve you, the way belching or vomiting relieved you.

As he started for the barn, Patricia suddenly came up to him.

"Where is your gun, Albert?" she asked.

"Where it always is. Here in my pocket. Why?"

"Because of the ox. You're not going to do anything to him, are you, Albert?"

"What?"

"I mean he's suffering and you might see that and forget that I want to cure him because he's all we have left."

Parker stood still. He took his wife by the shoulders, shook his head and roared with laughter. And as he laughed he felt that never in his life had he been so close to tears.

"What a silly hussy you are," he said.

With the help of the horse, he got the sick ox into the stall and dragged the dead one out behind the house. He dug a grave for the great animal, whose body was already swollen and coated with flies that sucked greedily on the masses of coagulated blood. It was heavy work, the sun was hot, and in the pit he was deprived of the fresh wind that was blowing. But finally it was done. The horse drew the corpse to the edge of the grave; then Parker untied the lines, because the weight of the ox when it fell would have dragged the horse down. He and Patricia gave the body the final push into the hole. Then they covered it over together, while the horse grazed near by, snorting and occasionally coughing.

They went back to the house where Parker took a drink of water from

the clay jug and ate a slice of bread. Patricia drank some milk, and then they went to the vegetable garden.

Patricia had fenced in a small patch because she liked the way it looked to have tomatoes, peas and beans growing together; she called the unfenced part of the garden the wilderness. It did look rather wild with its confused tangle of vines and stems; it would be difficult to do anything about the locusts there. The leaves were already considerably diminished, and there was the smell of hay and of the excretions of the locusts.

Between them the Parkers carried a tub of water and a pair of towels. They dipped the towels in the water and whipped them sharply across the plants. The locusts fell to the ground like ripe fruit. They fell on their backs and on their bellies, singly and in clusters, half stunned and in no way damaged. Then the Parkers' heavy boots hovered over them, came down and crushed their bodies between the soles of the boots and the dry, crackling earth.

"This feels good," Patricia said.

Parker looked at her and laughed. He had the locusts where he wanted them now. They could not defend themselves. They hung so thickly together that he could catch them up in a corner of the towel, grasp the mass with his hand and feel them crawling. And then with deliberation clench his fingers, returning evil for evil. It was wonderful to feel how they were slowly crushed to death, punished for what they were doing to him. They had wished to torment, and were being tormented; they had wished to destroy and were being destroyed; they had thought themselves splendid and dangerous, and they were no more than a heap of dirt. They would have to be stronger than this if they hoped to defeat him. They must have teeth to bite his hand, and feet to kick it; they must have an armour on their bodies that would withstand his hands' strength; and they must not have abdomens like butterflies.

Parker felt the sweat streaming down his face and body. His mouth was dry and there was a haze before his eyes. He noticed that his hands were trembling; and his brain felt feverish and intoxicated. He was avenging himself, avenging himself for his dead ox and his ruined harvest and his lost hopes. He was taking his revenge in advance for all the hardships that were still to come, for hunger and worry and misery; and for all the dangers whose names he did not know that lay in wait for him, subtle, cruel, menacing.

They had, nearly cleared the patch when the second swarm of locusts settled to the ground. It did not come in a storm, as had the first; it descended as quietly as a mist fills a still winter night. The swarm was so thick the Parkers could scarcely breathe; locusts populated all the air. The two felt smothered. They began flailing about them with their arms; they waved their towels wildly in the air to clear a little space

around their faces. Because they dared not open their mouths they soon lost their wind. They felt that the locusts were covering them completely. The locusts struck against the ground brittly, with a sound of falling sleet. Around their feet the crawling bobbing current rose over their ankles. And on all the plants of the garden they hung thicker than before. Once more the creatures' wings glistened and flashed; once more they clung with horny legs to hair, ears and clothing. Again they crawled under Albert's shirt and Patricia's blouse; and the more violently the two flailed about them, the closer came the extremity where they must open their mouths to breathe. That would be the end. Then the horrible insects would settle on their tongues, between their teeth, in their throats and windpipes.

Then it would be all up with them. These insects would do them in, as the cholera in Alma had not done, nor shootings in fourteen saloons from California to Colorado. Their lives rose before their eyes at this moment, and they were poor and sinful and unworthy in the sight of the Lord.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. The air cleared and it was possible to breathe; the wind was cool in their hair and on their faces. They did not look at each other because each was afraid of the other's eyes, and they said nothing because they could not yet control their voices. They cleansed themselves of clinging insects and waded slowly through the morass of locusts to the edge of the garden patch. Here they stood and gazed over the land, which was decked out with a living mantle. A burning shirt was consuming all the fruitfulness of the land; it was brown and repulsive and effectively concealed all green and growing and hopeful things.

"It's over," Parker said at last. His kindly face was distorted into an ugly mask; his eyes were the eyes of a ravaging beast of prey and his jaw was thrust forward.

"Albert," Patricia said softly, putting her hand on his arm.

"Let me alone."

"But it isn't all over, Albert."

"Let me alone, I tell you."

Patricia bent down, pushed the locusts aside and picked up a small lump of earth.

"The soil is still here."

"For God's sake, shut up."

"The sky is still here. And the wind and sun."

"Shut up, shut up, I tell you."

"And I'm still here, and the baby will come if God wills."

Parker groaned. "Did you say God?" he asked softly.

"Yes."

"Someone who does this to us you call God! Who fills the bellies of the rich and knocks the last crust out of the mouths of the poor; who

takes away the little land I need to live and gives it to others who own so much they never can see it all—is this your God? A God who gives you a fine helping hand when you're looking for gold and gambling and whoring around, and who knocks you down when you try to farm your land. That's what He is, a . . ."

"Albert!" Patricia screamed.

"Let me alone," Parker groaned.

"No, I won't let you go on blaspheming. I won't. For the baby's sake, I won't."

Parker laughed. "You can't blaspheme Him," he said. "Do you know what I'd do if He stood here before me?"

"Yes, Albert. You'd fall on your knees and beg Him for a miracle."

"Shit, I would."

"You would say, Take the locusts from a little part of my land."

"Would I?"

"Let me and my wife and baby and my animals live through the next year."

Parker laughed and took his revolver from his pocket.

"I would shoot at Him."

A shot rang out. The waves of the sound spread over the earth and rebounded from rocks and houses and the sides of hills, and were reflected back. Finally, they died away, and only a little smoke from the powder remained in the air. The wind had ceased; it was as though everything was holding its breath. As though a chill of terror had passed over the land and frozen it into silence. Life seemed to hesitate in mid-stride, wondering whether or not to go on.

And then the locusts took wing. At first there were only a few hovering in the air over the vegetable patch; there seemed to be little change. Then their numbers increased. The Parkers heard the fluttering of their wings and saw them rise slowly higher into the air and swell gradually into a swarm that resembled a snow flurry. They floated upward like smoke, with the head of the streamer already invisible in the sky while the fringe of it still touched the ground. Finally the entire column broke loose from the ground and was driven by the wind inaudibly over the land.

Slowly Parker turned his big head and looked at Patricia. His eyes were wide and dilated, and a little frightened.

"Say," he said, "do you see that? They're gone."

Patricia did not answer.

"The shot did it."

"Yes, Albert, the shot."

"A single shot."

"God, yes, a single shot."

"And they would have eaten up our whole garden if I hadn't happened to—blaspheme God."

"Yes."

Parker began walking with long strides toward the corn. Patricia trotted after him with pounding heart. Could God send a miracle in return for blasphemy? Could one extort mercy from Him? Must one not pray for it and plead for it on one's knees, as she had been taught in the church of Montevista? She was not devout; she didn't obey God's commandments. She was a lost woman, an outcast, and she had not been inside a church since she had begun her life in the saloons. But she was humble. She believed. She believed in heaven and in the angels, in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, in the Virgin of Padua and in St. Francis of Assisi. She believed in the Last Judgment and in eternal damnation; in the devil and hell and all the torments of purgatory. She had never spoken of this to Albert, but she had insisted that they be married in a church; she owned a rosary and could say the Ave Maria in both English and Italian.

When Parker shot his gun once more, nothing happened. The locusts paid no heed; and after the third and fourth shots they remained clinging to grass and leaves. Parker emptied the chamber of the revolver without result. With a sigh he replaced it in his pocket.

They went back to the vegetable patch without speaking. They stared into space, feeling weary, almost exhausted. The water in the pail was swimming with locusts; Parker had to fetch fresh water from the well. Patricia was already at work when he returned.

He watched her for a while, beating and trampling, beating and trampling. She stood erect on her long, slender legs, as though she did not feel tired and weakened by all that had happened. Step by step she moved down the rows of plants, her pregnant belly brushing against leaves and her breasts visible through her blouse when she stretched out her arms.

He stepped up to her and caught her waist with his arm. He drew her close until her body pressed against him; he felt the warmth of her arms around his neck and saw her tilt her head back as her lips parted slightly.

He bent to her until his lips touched hers, and so they made up.

The sun was hot, the air gentle and the earth warm as a morning bed. The tall peas and beans formed a dense wall, closing them off from the world. From this world of locusts, of fields and gardens and meadows carpeted with locusts that grew fatter and stronger as the minutes passed; from this world that was devouring, hostile and pitiless.

They started when they heard a cry.

"Hey, hello," someone called.

They separated and turned around. They saw a woman standing near their house with two pails in her hands, looking around inquiringly. She was tall and broad and rather masculine in bearing.

"My name is Betty Maxwell," the woman said, setting down the pails and wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Our name is Parker," Albert said. "What can we do for you?"

"I've just spent the night at the place of a man named Bieber, here in the neighbourhood. I mean, myself and my husband. This afternoon their well got stopped up. There's no water in the place and a sick baby in the house and no food and locusts in their fields and the man's just about at the end of his strength." She spat forcibly and placed her arms akimbo. "Stinking mess it is. Such rotten luck, 's enough to make you bawl. I wish I knew where the devil all these locusts come from." She shook her head and rubbed her big hands over her tanned, bare arms.

"It's the same here," Parker said. "Only that our ox has kicked off,"

"What about water?"

"I guess we have water."

He went to the well and pumped. The water flowed spasmodically out of the pipe.

"Well, that's something," Betty said. She took her pails to the well and Parker filled them for her. They were heavy; she would probably spill half on her way back to the Biebers'. But that was her business. You couldn't worry about others' troubles when your own house was burning.

"When's your baby coming?" she asked Patricia unceremoniously, but with a certain kindness.

"In four months, I think."

"A rotten time for babies. My God, what a life. A dog could stand it, but not a human being. Working day in and day out and then harvesting locusts instead of wheat. Where do they all come from?"

She dried her hands on her skirt, then began arranging her hair.

"Where do you come from?" Parker asked.

"Arkansas."

"And where are you going, if I'm not too nosy?"

"East. They say things are lots better in the East. Provided you're willing to give up the idea of farming or digging gold. I hear there's as much work as you want. We only live once, so we want to enjoy ourselves. Understand?"

"Yes."

"You can be a clerk if you know how to write."

"Uh-huh."

"Or work in a factory."

"Uh-huh."

"Or in the shipyards."

"Hm."

"When the week is up you always get the money that's earning to you and nothing can take it away from you. No storms and no droughts and no locusts, and good pay for your work. Nothing to suggest to you, look

here, fellow, you've worked twelve hours a day, but you haven't made anything and besides that you're getting a swarm of locusts; so if you don't want to starve next winter you'll have to live on them."

"We know all about that," Patricia said. "And lots more besides. For instance, you might be a dancing girl or a 'hostess' in saloons. Oh, it's a marvellous life. Not a single locust all day long and as much to eat and drink as you want. Only, of course, you can't do what you like. And you have to go to bed with any man the boss says. And you have to give up eighty per cent. of what you earn and pay your board and room until you've got more debts than hair on your head. And the boss keeps you because of your debts and supports himself by your debts. And if you get sick he kicks you out, and if you don't earn enough he gives you the devil or sends you out on the streets. Then the fun begins. I can tell you. . . ."

"I wasn't talking about that," Betty interrupted. "I wasn't saying a bawdy house was a decent life."

"I know," Patricia said, stepping up to her. She leaned forward until her face was almost touching Betty Maxwell's, and she spoke in a strident, angry voice. "That is all we needed—for someone like you to come here and tell us stories about life in the city. About the marvellous life of a chambermaid, cleaning other people's toilets, or a seamstress who gets consumption because all she has to eat is the dust from the cloth. Or flower girls who are little better off than beggars, or washerwomen who faint after twelve hours at their tubs. I know all about it; I finished with that sort of thing long ago."

"Well, well," Betty said, putting her hand appeasingly on Patricia's shoulders. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Patricia straightened and clasped her hands over her belly. "Excuse me," she said, shaking her head. "I guess I'm a little over-excited to-day. Maybe it's the baby. Since we have the locusts, it hurts me more than ever to hear anyone speak against our land. I feel that it's something alive that we can't just leave in the lurch the way we would leave a town we're sick of. Now that it's sick it needs us more than ever. It's alive, like a big, grateful animal, and in the end it will never leave us in the lurch."

She fell suddenly silent.

"Won't you come into the house for a while?" Parker asked.

The stranger shook her head. She picked up the two pails and turned. Patricia remembered suddenly that the woman had said something about a sick baby.

"Didn't you say the Biebers' baby is sick?" she asked.

Betty Maxwell turned her head. "Yes, the boy," she replied.

"What's the matter with him?"

"I don't know. He has fever. Maybe it's his lungs. Maybe he isn't a strong kid."

"Don't you think I ought to see about him, Albert?" Patricia asked.

"It's not necessary," Betty Maxwell said shortly. "There are too many people bothering about the kid already." She turned and began striding across the yard. She must have been very strong to carry the pails as she did. She braced her arms away from her body so that the heavy buckets would not knock against her legs and spill the water. "Thanks for the water," she called out, and then vanished behind the house.

"Funny dame," Parker said. They went to the house and began cooking something to eat. The sun came diagonally through the window into a hot, close room. They sat down and began eating; now and then their bare arms touched and their eyes met.

When they had finished, Parker got up and went to the door. Patricia sat still at the table, wishing she might lay her head on her arm and sleep a little.

"I think we'll try the potatoes now," Parker said.

"Don't you think we ought to look in at the Biebers?" Patricia asked.

"But we have no time."

"No, we don't."

"Besides, we can't help. What do we know about sick children?"

"Not much."

They were silent for a while. At last Parker came back into the room and put his hand on Patricia's head. "We'll go in the evening," he said. "We'll take the horse and wagon and a lantern; then we can get back after dark."

Patricia nodded. And then they went to the potato field and worked together until dusk. They were contented with their work. If they could keep the potatoes as clean as they now had them, the greater part of the field would be saved. If only the locusts remained on the edges. And if the locusts didn't eat too much of the potato vines . . . If the locusts . . . if the locusts . . . if the locusts . . .

They rode across the land in the wagon, sitting close together, Patricia with a knitted shawl around her shoulders and a kerchief on her head. The horse was big, brown and heavy-footed, and going uphill his head nodded to right and to left.

In the dusk their voices had a strangely high-pitched sound; involuntarily they spoke lower.

"The ox isn't better yet," Patricia said.

"He ate a little," Parker replied.

"But he snorts so horribly, as though there's something wrong with his heart."

"Maybe he's in pain."

"I think I ought to bandage his leg tighter. I wasn't strong enough yesterday to do it alone."

"Yes, and maybe I ought to make regular splints for him, so that the bone doesn't grow together crooked."

"Suppose we gave him something strengthening like whisky. Pain weakens."

"Whisky? Whisky to an ox?"

"How do we know, Albert? We're all alone and we want to save the beast, that's all. So I think of everything. Everything that would do a man good. After all, he's a little like a man."

"Hm."

"Maybe it's sinful, but I always think we ought to have more pity for him than for a man. He's an animal and can't talk; he just suffers and can't scream. I know how horrible that is, Albert."

They fell silent and listened to the squeaking of the wheels and the crunch of the sand under the horse's hoofs.

It was almost dark when they drove into the Biebers' yard. They left the wagon near the Maxwells' big covered wagon and knocked on the house door.

Bieber opened it for them. He stood for a moment abstractedly. His hair was tangled and he gazed at them with a blank expression, then let them in without a word. The lamp was burning; Bieber's wife and Betty Maxwell sat at the edge of the baby's bed. A small man sat on a chair near the stove, and on the stove stood a kettle. There was a smell of camomile in the air.

No one paid any attention to them. Bieber went to the window and leaned his head against the pane. He stood with shoulders drawn up and hands clasped over his chest, as though praying. The kettle on the stove boiled softly. Now and then the little man opened the firebox and threw a stick of wood on the fire. For a long time these were the only sounds.

The child lay under the heavy quilt and they could not see him. But suddenly he began to talk. He talked in a high, clear voice, something about the locusts. They could understand little because the words blurred, and because he laughed and cried alternately as he talked. When he stopped Betty Maxwell began whispering to him.

"You mustn't be afraid, darling," she said. "Locusts are just silly little creatures and you can squeeze them to death in your hands. You can tear out their legs and their wings and they can't hurt you."

Parker felt Patricia clench his hand. She drew him into a corner of the room, her shoes scratching on the sand floor. Clara Bieber looked up and seemed to notice them for the first time. She inclined her head, lifted it and inclined it again, and her eyes were sad and helpless. Then she looked at the boy again.

Betty Maxwell stood up and went to the stove.

"What's the matter with him?" Patricia asked in a whisper.

"How do I know?"

She opened the kettle and dipped a piece of flannel into it, then drew it out again. She dangled it from the tips of her fingers until it had cooled slightly, then spread it out.

"Can I do anything?" Patricia asked.

"Pray."

"Is that all?"

"Maybe it's more than I could do."

The woman returned to the bed. She bent down and drew the child to a sitting position. Now the Parkers could see him. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be asleep. His face appeared terribly small; his mouth was slightly open. Again he began to talk. He did not open his eyes as he talked, but he moved his hands. Once more he seemed to be talking about the locusts; it was the only word Patricia could make out clearly.

The woman laid him back in the pillows. Clara Bieber raised her hand to her eyes for a moment as though she was going to cry. Then she regained control of herself.

"Don't worry, you're not alone, my baby," Betty Maxwell whispered to the child. "Everybody is here and nothing can happen to you—papa and mamma and Aunt Betty and Uncle Homer and Aunt Parker and Uncle Parker." She stopped. The baby began to cry as though he wanted her to go on, and so she continued: "And Aunt Lamp and Uncle Stove and Aunt Coffeepot and Uncle Chair and Aunt Candle and Uncle Table." It was like a lullaby; the child became quiet and Betty's voice faded gradually away. Finally, she sat still with half-open mouth, bending over the child.

Patricia sat down on a chair and Parker leaned against the wall. They might as well go home, for they could not help. But they stayed. They were there, and it was good that they were there; they knew it was good, even though they were no more than two motionless shadows against the wall who also were concerned about the baby.

Bieber came away from the window and went to the table. He was not wearing shoes and made little noise as he moved. He turned his head and stood immobile for minutes, looking at the child. Then he went to the stove, opened the firebox and bent down until the glow of the fire was crimson on his face. His face was so mournful that Patricia was on the point of going to him and trying to console him. Then Clara Bieber began to cry.

It was not crying so much as a low sobbing. Everyone in the room held his breath when he heard it. Bieber remained as though numbed at the stove; the firebox was still open and the crackling flames cast shadows on the floor.

"Warm rags, quick, quick, warm rags," Betty said in a hard, hoarse voice.

Patricia sprang up and ran to the stove. She opened the kettle and

looked around for a cloth, then, finding none, took her kerchief and dipped it into the boiling water. She brought it to the bed.

"More," Betty said. Patricia ran back to the stove, this time taking the shawl she wore around her shoulders.

She could not see the baby. She could see only Betty Maxwell's back and hear her breathing. Betty's arms were working, her shoulders were working rhythmically, and the back of her neck glistened with moisture.

"More, hotter," she said, and again Patricia ran to the stove, brushing Bieber aside with her shoulder. The boiling water stung her hands, but she had no time to wait until it was cooler; she immersed her shawl, wrung it out on the floor and raced back to the bed.

Betty was now lying with the child. She held him pressed tight against her with her head touching his and her lips on his lips. Patricia stood holding the cloth, waiting and listening to the hissing sound of the air the woman was blowing into the child's lungs. She felt the cloth growing cold and scurried back to the stove. When she returned with it again, Betty snatched it from her hand. Without looking up, she began working again. Her arms and shoulders moved rhythmically once more, the perspiration stained her blouse and her breathing became so loud and raucous that it drowned out all other sounds in the room.

Patricia stood with her eyes fixed on Betty, listening for her slightest word, the most inaudible direction. She watched her every movement, seeing and hearing no one but Betty. She did not notice when Parker went to the stove, closed the door of the firebox and placed the cover on the kettle.

"Don't give up," someone said behind her. She did not turn around, but she knew it must be the little man, because she had never before heard his voice.

"Don't worry," Betty replied. Her words were like a groan, as though she was almost completely exhausted.

But she was not—far from it. You do not let a child die in convulsions so long as you have any breath left. Though your life has been far from the best, and you're on your way to exploit the poor and destroy the meek, you're not so rotten that you give up when you still have some small strength left.

"More," she said; and again Patricia brought hot cloths. Without pause Betty rubbed and massaged the child; the stains on her blouse widened and the sweat dripped from her throat on to the pillows.

He was a good child; he'd withstood the first attack; not the kind of child that would die under your hands. He had heavy ribs and firm bones and a big chest. His skin was clear and healthy, his blond hair silken and his grey eyes gleaming. If only he would open his eyes again. If only he would begin to breathe by himself again; if only she herself could breathe more easily.

"Do you want a swig of whisky?" the little man asked.

Betty nodded. He held the bottle to her mouth and she tilted her head back and drank. A few drops ran down the side of her mouth to her chin, where they remained hanging and mingled with her sweat.

The smell of the alcohol made Patricia's stomach turn. But she must not faint now. She must stay on her feet and run back and forth with hot cloths. There would be plenty of time to lie down and rest afterward, to lie down and think of nothing. But first they must save the child. First they must save the child. First they must save the child . . .

She started with fright. Clara Bieber had begun to pray. She spoke the words in a half-whisper, and Patricia could not understand them because they were in a foreign language. But the meaning of them, the begging, dolorous meaning of them, was clear; Patricia, too, clasped her hands and intoned an Ave Maria. Her words were inaudible, and not for a moment did she think of what she was saying. Her only thought was the child, and the woman. If only they did not break down, she and this woman. Not yet, not yet. Dear God, not yet.

And then, suddenly, it was over. Betty Maxwell dropped her arms; Clara Bieber's prayers halted; Heinrich Bieber listened with bated breath; Albert Parker rubbed his hand over his forehead; and the little man reached for the whisky bottle.

And the baby cried loudly.

The Mennonites bore the second swarm with more equanimity than the first. They stood in their fields, bowing their heads between their shoulders and pulling their hats down lower over their foreheads, and waited until it was over. Then they began patiently, and with a certain obdurateness, to do their work all over again.

They cut down unripe fields and shovelled locusts into sacks. They burned locusts with the hay of their meadows. They trampled locusts with the vegetables of their gardens. They crushed locusts with their bare hands. They ground them under the soles of their bare feet. They destroyed locusts by every technique they could think of.

They worked calmly, unhurriedly, without feelings of hatred or revenge against the insects. It was something that must be done; they did not puzzle wherefore, and they did not contend with God.

Their bodies and clothes stank from the gut and the juices of the insects. Their hands were greasy, and broken locust limbs stuck to their shirts and trousers. Their eyes smarted, they could scarcely stand straight, and when dusk began to fall they saw that it had all been in vain. They were too weak and there were too many locusts; for every hundred they trampled a thousand were left alive.

And so they took their tools on their shoulders and returned to the village. The women walked beside the men and read in their faces how

things stood; knowing, they held their peace and asked no questions. The children followed, trampling what locusts they came across on the way.

When the Mennonite families came home, the women set the soup to warm on the stove and the men went to the barn; the children fetched water and set out plates of milk for the cats.

Before they began to eat they said grace. It was the customary grace, but spoken by slightly different voices. After the Amen they sat down and emptied the deep bowls; then they took a second helping and ate until they were filled. They sopped up the remainder with bread.

Then the men left their houses and the elders met for conference. The younger men stood together in the darkness talking about the locusts. These were of a species they had never seen before. Smaller and browner, and their feelers were shorter than those they knew. But they ate as they had done in the Crimea and in the Ukraine. They ate whatever they found before them; and they ate all things green and full of sap. Yes, they agreed, it was a hard blow and one of God's severest trials; each man was too weak to fight against it. Without the locusts the harvest would have been a good one, a blessed one; this soil was rich and virgin, and next year they could make good what they lost this year. If only they survived. If they could save something and were able to remain.

This was what the men in the street discussed; they spoke in moderated voices, gazing up now and then at the star-studded sky of Kansas.

The council of the elders sat in Schermer's parlour, around the round table, under the lamp. The men had paused for a moment and were now silent. Everyone had spoken his opinion, had said what he thought should be done; and now all the opinions must be soberly considered. The windows were open to the cool night air, and often the evening breeze carried the sound of voices from the street. A moth fell with a low thud to the table and lay still in the midst of the men, with quivering wings, as though out of breath. It had a silken body and a large head; and its swarthy face somehow resembled that of an owl. All the men watched the creature that lay dazed in the light of the lamp, with wings brown as the earth and delicately fringed—a creature that belonged to the darkness, not to the light.

Schermer stretched out his hand. The insect remained quiet, even when his fingers came quite close to it; it seemed afraid of nothing.

"Let us decide, brothers," Schermer said, his eyes upon the moth rather than the men, and moving his fingers slowly and cautiously forward.

"We know that each man by himself can do no more, and that there is no longer any sense for one of us to light a fire, for another to dig a trench and for a third to do I don't know what. From now until the next harvest there will be no such thing as your land and my land and

Reimer's land, but only all our land. The fields that lie in the middle will be given up, and the community will try to save those on the edges for all. If there is a harvest from them, which we humbly pray the Lord there will be, it will be the harvest for all of us. If there is only hunger, all will be hungry; none will have all he needs and none will have a crust more than his neighbour. The seed in the bins will be distributed to all in the spring, so that no one's field need lie fallow for lack of seed. The cattle will be fed so that there will be milk for all who have children, butter for the holidays, and cheese when God is gracious to us. The cattle that cannot be fed will be slaughtered or sold or sent out to pasture. But no land will be sold. Not a stone of the land that is ours. For we have not bought it for the present day alone, and we have not given of our strength to this land for the days of our own lives, but in order that it shall be Mennonite land for all time."

The moth had crawled on to Schermer's hand and was poised motionless on his cracked brown skin. The men still watched it fixedly; their features were tranquil and impenetrable, and it was difficult to say whether or not they had been listening to Schermer.

"Be it so," Miller said, raising his head. The others nodded, and knew that what they had decided was good; that it would meet with the feeling of the community and with the will of God.

"Be it so," old Reimer said also. But then he spoke on, and the men scarcely breathed as they listened because he spoke so low.

"So it shall be to-day, when the locusts are in our fields," he said. "And so it shall be while the sun shines and it is warm, while we still have our cattle in our barns and milk in the pails. It will be all very well so long as you still have your flour in the bin and your seed stored and a few dollars saved. Your stomachs are still filled, and your hearts have not lost the courage of the good days. But how will it be when the lean months come; when you, who are hungry, are asked to give from your poverty; and when you, whose children are wan, are told that you must share the insufficient milk you have? It will be a frightful life if each counts his fellow's crumbs and if your own need becomes your measure of justice. Are not your children a shade paler than your brother's; and are you sure you didn't see a light in his barn in the middle of the night? Has he hidden flour in his barn, when two ounces belong to you and yours? Two ounces of flour. Two ounces. Think of all you could do with two ounces of flour.

"The devil will enter all your houses if you do not lock your doors against him in time; and that is why I am saying this now. Not to tell you that we should do what must be done, but to tell you that we must do it well. We must do it with the help of all. No one must refuse to join, and if any should refuse, let him be free to go, and the community will take over his property for a fair price."

"Where will the money come from?" Schermer asked.

"The community will borrow it from a moneylender, and everyone who remains will guarantee it."

"What do the brothers say to that?" Miller asked, looking around the circle. The men nodded, and again all knew it was good.

Reimer, too, looked around, with wrinkled face and eyes smiling wisely. None would desert once he knew his land had value, and none would take money instead of land. One must know what men were like, with their weakness and their faults, with the strength of their hearts and hands. The Lord had created them frail, and this, too, was good. Reimer understood their hearts and their thoughts, and because he understood he loved.

That night the men of Gnadenau decided that no one was any longer to be master over the things he owned, and that the strength of all would be employed to save a little for all.

Then they returned to their houses. Their wives were still lying awake, and they sat up in bed when they heard their men coming. They blinked when the lamp was lit, but after their eyes had adjusted to the light, they studied the men's faces. They saw that the faces were calm and firm, and that there was still hope; they had not lost their houses and their lands and their new life.

"Well, what has happened?" they asked.

"Don't worry, wife," the men replied. "We've had harder times than this. To-morrow we'll try something new, and if that doesn't help we'll try something else; and we won't do it alone. We'll all work together and if God is merciful we'll save something; and if that is not His will we'll hunger somewhat and slaughter some of the cattle and not have much else. But we will keep the land and we already have next year's seed to begin. At the worst we'll have lost a single year of our lives. One year out of the many God gives us. Is that so bad?"

"No," the women said, lying back on the pillow. "No, that isn't so bad."

"If anyone wants to leave," the men went on, "the community will buy his land for a fair price."

"Who will sell his land?" the women said.

The men shrugged and yawned; then they undressed, got into bed and blew out the lamp.

Who would dream of selling his land? they thought just before they fell asleep.

Before the sun rose the hill was outlined so sharply against the sky that every shrub and tree could be discerned as a silhouette. Then the sun's rays ate a hole in the earth, and before long the growing things could not be seen at all. But soon they were visible once more, though

no longer as black outlines; now they had colour of their own and glistened in the sun.

Just as dawn was breaking the farmers of Gnadenau streamed out of the village in a long procession. One behind the other they ascended the hill, the women following the men and the children following the women, and the dogs running alongside. Their low conversations sounded like murmured prayers. Now and then they paused, as though by chance, to allow the old men and women to rest; it was as though they were making the Stations of the Cross. But naturally none of them thought of that; when they paused it was to catch their breath and to look down into the valley, where their straw-roofed houses stood like living things growing out of the earth.

Lydia had walked in the midst of the procession. She had felt good, and stronger than most of the others. She had helped her mother when she was out of breath, and carried a tired child up the hill. Her eyes had been friendly, and the few words she spoke were kind and natural.

When they arrived at the crest, she put down the child and wiped her damp face with the tip of her apron. Then she looked around. She was standing a little apart from the others; but surely that was only chance; with two strides she could be among them again. She heard a woman telling a story in a half-whisper, but she could not distinguish the words. When the others laughed, the laugh sounded hateful to her, as though they were laughing at her. And so she remained where she was, turning her back on them and regarding the valley, where a fine stream of dust still hung in the air over the path by which they had arrived. Yes, it was clear, they did not want her; they had secrets from her. They were making remarks that she couldn't understand. She had been alien from them from the very beginning, and that was why they would not admit her to their circle now. Well, she would not thrust her way in. She could remain alone if she must. She had held out her hand to them; there was no more she could do. She had been friendly and carried one of the children and smiled; she had broken the hard encrustation within herself.

Her mother came to her side.

"Come," she said, "let us begin the work."

Lydia turned. The farmers had formed a row, standing so close that they almost touched. Most of them had pot lids in their hands; some held spoons and pans, and a few were equipped with wooden clubs and box covers. They hoped to frighten the locusts with noisemaking and slowly drive them along before them. Artificially, they would provoke them to become a moving swarm, and when they had left the field a fire would be started behind them so that they could not return. Then they would post guards on all four corners of the field; these guards would watch the ground and look among the grass and under leaves; and if they saw many

locusts they would fetch help. If a new swarm appeared, the whole village would come again. If the new swarm dropped from the air, they would be able to do nothing; then they would go home and next day begin the whole work afresh.

Lydia took her place at the very end of the row. The girls and women had left no place for her, nor for Caroline, and so the two stood together beside the men. At a command the orchestra struck up. It was a shrill, cacophonous clattering and rattling, so loud that the air seemed to tremble. It was noise as obnoxious and repulsive as the locusts themselves; and it was inescapable; it spread over the entire field. It did not vary, like a biologic sound; its pitch and loudness did not change; it was as monotonous and maddening as the squeaking of wagon wheels.

At first the locusts seemed unaffected. They ate and crawled, hopped and fluttered, and their blissful life as conscienceless parasites was undisturbed. They seemed to be unaware of what was going on around them; it did not mar one second of the intoxicating joy of their existence and of the pure pleasure of gnawing and trickling spittle and excrement.

Then, suddenly, there was a change. The waves of air striking their auditory senses must have aroused in them the instinct of flight. Experiences that sprang from remotest antiquity were revived in them; experiences that had been handed down in the egg from the mothers of locusts to the children of locusts. Once, in primeval times, generations of locusts had paid with their lives to gain this experience, to acquire this instinct of flight. From the times of the ichthyosaurus to the age of the railroad the locusts had amassed experience; the impressions left their mark on them as when a trickle of water falling upon a stone for countless ages at last creates a depression.

The locusts began to crawl. At first it was imperceptible, or if one noticed, it seemed a fortuitous motion. But soon it became quite definite. They had averted their heads from the direction of the sound. Then their bodies turned, and they began to move, to flee.

The clusters of insects clinging to ears and leaves began to dissolve. They dripped apart like thawing ice. They became thin and fluid, and soon they were moving like a brownish slime down the stalks to the ground. Many clusters splashed outward like a puddle into which a stone has been thrown, and locusts joined other clusters like muddy drops of water. But these clusters, too, were already in motion; they, too, had begun to dissolve into individual locusts that were crawling restively and hungrily on the ground. Their unrest was exaggerated by the fright of those that joined them.

For each locust carried his terror with him, carried it invisibly from ear to ear, from stalk to stalk. Each transmitted it to the others, to those that were still sitting and eating unsuspectingly. They carried terror in their legs and wings and antennæ; perhaps their excrement had a smell

other than its normal smell. The whole swarm was infected, and by the time the Mennonites took their first step forward a mass flight had begun. It was like rolling up a carpet; the roll became thicker and thicker at the farmers' feet.

Amid all the din Lydia suddenly heard Schermer laughing. She looked around and saw the big man walking broad-shouldered in the centre of the row, beating two pot-covers together as though he was drummer in the Czar's Regiment. He began to sing. It was a Cossack melody, and the older men of the community did not like to hear it. But it was wild and jolly and suited what they were doing. Lydia began to hum the refrain; the others took it up, and finally they all began to sing.

*Come riding, hoi and holla,
The Cossacks race the wind.
Their horses, hoi and holla,
Are of the devil's kind.*

Lydia smiled. It was good to feel strong, good to feel the ground under-foot and know that it was the old soil that you had trod all the days of your life. It was good to be stronger than a locust swarm and not have to sit by while it passed over you.

She examined the others' faces. The old people were unemotional and tight-lipped as ever; they clattered and beat their pot-covers. But the younger ones shared her feelings. She could read it in their eyes and in the movements of their hands and arms. This was a dance, or a festival; or if not that, then a pilgrimage in honour of the Lord.

As the sun rose it grew hotter, and in spite of the steady wind the farmers began to sweat. Now and then one stood still, pushing back his hat and wiping his face. The singing had stopped and the noise was more unbearable than ever. In the early morning it had been fun to hear this frightful noise. But in the hotter noonday air it had gradually become a diabolic sound. The faces of the old people had retained their impassivity, but the youngsters were now tense and weary. The children had begun to drop out of the row, and many had not come back; they had lain down in the shadows on the edge of the hill and fallen asleep. The old women, too, were at the limit of their strength. The field was too big and the edge was not yet in sight; nowhere could they see the small trench over which they must drive the locusts before they could set fire to it.

Their sight wavered, their knees began to tremble and their arms ached. But it must be done; heaven knows, they couldn't leave their husbands to do it alone, nor their sons and sons-in-law. This field would have to be saved if they were to have any bread in the winter. Let no one say they were good for nothing but eating; let no one think they were nothing but a burden.

The old women glanced surreptitiously around. Were they not almost sisters? Were they not like the daughters of a single mother, with their faces identically wrinkled and their leathery skin; with their narrow lips and wide hips and broad feet? Were they not like a single family, and all who stood here on this hill descendants of that family? The Kettlers and Schermers and Defrieses and Reimers and Millers, with their parents and children and their children's children; with the memories and hopes and wishes of each, which were shared by all; and with their common Faith. Yes, yes, they were. It was so, and this was well. Amen, Amen.

But it did not help the old people to divert their thoughts. After a while two left the row; a little later another stepped out; and finally only Reimer's wife was left. She stood at her husband's side and beat a board with her club. She was not exhausted; her knees did not quiver and there was no haze before her eyes. Each time someone left the line she shook her head. There was still fifty yards to go—a stretch no wider than a narrow river, and nothing at all compared to what they had already covered.

"They can't last it," she said to her husband.

"They're old," Reimer said, shaking his head.

"They're weak. Just because there's not a fire or flood behind them, or someone with a knout, they think they can't stand the last fifty yards. They're weak because they're foolish. Their imagination cannot envision something they don't see. The Lord has stricken them with blindness."

Reimer smiled forbearingly. How easy it was for those who were strong to be strong, and how hard it was to explain to the strong the weakness of others.

"What's so funny?" his wife asked.

Reimer was about to answer when he felt someone tapping his side. He turned and saw Schermer standing next to him and nodding his head in the direction of the field's edge. Reimer looked. There were so many locusts over the field that it looked like a pond at evening when the gnats have just come out. But that was not what Schermer meant. There was something else, something grotesque and incomprehensible, toward which all had turned their heads. The things looked like two scarecrows; yet they were creatures moving, with arms and hands of flesh, long necks and yellowish-white beards; two men whom none of the settlers had ever seen before. They stood with hands in their pockets and outstretched necks; the hats they wore were riddled with holes, their eyes were mournful, and their clothes were like canvas, so stiff with dirt. They stood waiting humbly, as though they were beggars come to supplicate for a piece of bread or a plate of soup.

Lydia and Caroline, at the end of the line, were the first to smell the odour that emanated from the two. After a while the others smelled it too. It was a compound of sweetishness and decay; the Mennonites

realized that it was the stench of carrion. It was the smell of dead animals after they had lain in the open field for a few days. The odour was so repulsive that one was prompted to look for the corpse and bury it.

The two strangers stood still even when the locusts thickened around them. They did not seem to notice that hundreds of insects had settled on them; it was only when they felt locusts crawling on their faces that they raised their arms and ran their dirty hands over their throats, crushing locusts against their prominent Adam's apples.

The Mennonites were seized with a great suspense. They drummed and rattled and clattered as before, but their thoughts were of the two strangers, who seemed to them weird and ill-omened. The odour of carrion made the Mennonites sick and dizzy; again and again they looked up at the faces with their long noses and mournful eyes.

"Hey, you," Schermer called, unable to endure the waiting.

The men did not answer, but they raised their hands and waved; their movements seemed to possess a certain solemnity. Lydia, who was close to them, could see that above their beards stubble whiskers grew out of their dirty faces; and there were wisps of hair growing out of their noses and ears. The men's nails were like the claws of a bird. Their trousers were tattered at the cuffs and their boots torn; there were buttons missing from their coats. Altogether, they were a most wretched pair.

When the Mennonites at last reached the edge of the field, the sun was high in the sky. The plantings behind them were saved; if the Lord willed and if the weather was favourable they would reap the harvest from it in three weeks.

They lit a fire behind the locust swarm and posted guards at all four corners of the field. Then Miller and several others went to speak with the two men.

"My name is George Hilpert," one of them said.

"And I'm Francis Lacoste," said the other.

"Martin Miller," Miller murmured; then he named the others with him, and all mumbled that they were pleased to meet the men, while Hilpert and Lacoste said, in the Westerner's manner, that they were proud to meet them all.

"What brings you here?" Miller asked.

"Nothing special. We're on our way back east. Looking for business. We're moneylenders. We lend money to people who're in need."

"Moneylenders?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you'll find much business here. I doubt that anyone in Gnadenau needs money."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. We're camped in a little tent just outside the village. We're staying just for a few days. We ourselves aren't rich, but

we made a little pile out of buffalo bones; maybe one of you will find that he's somewhat hard up. Especially after the next swarms come. Especially then."

They looked around with their wide, mournful eyes at the men standing around them. After a while Schermer asked, "What do you mean, the next swarms?"

Hilpert and Lacoste shrugged and turned away. They would go now. They had found it better not to say anything more about the new swarms. Let the farmers think their own thoughts about it; it took time for things to penetrate their thick heads. Let them use what brains they had to brood about it all night. After a while the seed would sprout and they would reap the harvest; then they would not have come in vain to this God-forsaken valley.

"Wait a moment, gentlemen," old Reimer said. "What kind of story is this about the next swarms?"

One of the two turned. "We don't like to tell sad tales," he said. "But for weeks our eyes have seen nothing but misery and misfortune; we would have to be men of stone to feel indifferent. It's something that goes more than skin deep, gents. It makes your tongue wag sometimes when you'd be smarter just to swallow what you know. But somehow you don't keep your mouth shut, and then you're in for it. You don't shut up because you think maybe a farmer can do something if he knows that three or four or five swarms are coming. You let your tongue wag because you're too damned goodhearted." He turned to his companion, who still stood with his back to the men. "Isn't it so, Hilpert?" he asked. "What did I say to you this morning? 'Hilpert,' I said, 'Hilpert, from now on we keep our mouths shut. Hilpert, it's a devil's trick to rob men of their peace, even though it's the pure and simple truth you tell them about what's coming. It's devil's work,' I said, 'because if the Lord wanted them to know He'd show them Himself.'"

Hilpert slowly turned his head and nodded.

"He did say that," he agreed. "And he's right; isn't he?"

The farmers did not reply. They stared down at the silly tools they held in their hands: the pot lids and spoons and pans and box covers. What was the sense of all this work if three or four or five more swarms were coming? Were not two enough? Two had been almost too much for their strength. Would it not be better to leave the land to the locusts and wait until God was moved to end this plague?

Lacoste sighed. "It's lousy," he said. "Such marvellous land, such good soil, and so much wasted strength. It's a rotten thing, and it's stronger than men are. It's hard luck, like a hailstorm. Can you go out in a hailstorm and defend yourself against the hailstones with a cane?"

"No," Reimer replied. "But I still don't understand about these new swarms that are supposed to come."

"Maybe they won't come down here at all," Hilpert said. "They might turn off to the south. Or they might glut themselves somewhere else and stay there until they kick off. Perhaps this valley will be spared and there will be only two, instead of seven."

"Seven?" Schermer asked.

"I didn't mean to say anything," Hilpert exclaimed.

Lacoste gazed sorrowfully at him. "You oughtn't to let your tongue run on like that," he said. "You ought to keep your mind on what you're saying. You don't talk to sick men about dying." He fell silent and looked around. He knew what these men looked like. He knew their gnarled faces and their bright eyes with wrinkles surrounding them; he knew their tough hands and broad backs, and their heavy feet that seemed to hold firm to the ground by their own weight alone. He had seen them in wheatfields and beetfields and vegetable gardens from the Colorado border to this valley of Gnadenau; always they had stood in the same manner, with locusts all around them.

"We are not sick," Reimer said, "and we are not the sort to fall sick before idle talk." He turned abruptly and walked off with bowed back and knees slightly bent. Miller followed him, then Schermer, and then all the others.

They said nothing and did not turn around to look again at the two men. When they came to the other side of the field they sat down on the ground. The women sent the children off, cut slices of bread, filled cups with milk, and knew without asking that something was wrong. They sat upright on the slope and waited for someone to tell them.

But the men chewed and drank and swallowed and felt their hunger gradually sated. They did not know what to say and so they blinked at the sun and sleepily searched for the right words. But what was the sense of talking about it? How would it help if the women knew? For it would make their hearts heavy again.

Besides, why should they believe what these two old gallows birds had said? It might well be a ruse to frighten them and prompt them to borrow money. Were not these two old creatures, who smelled of carrion as coyotes do, no more than emissaries of hell, come to destroy pious servants of the Lord?

The thought that they had kept their dignity and not fallen into a trap made them feel better. They looked for the pair. Perhaps they had vanished as they had come and it was all a phantasm over which they would laugh later on.

But the pair had not vanished. They were still standing in the same spot, like two ramshackle fence posts among the clean fields.

"I guess they're not leaving," Caroline Miller said.

"I don't trust them," one of the women remarked.

"Wouldn't like to meet them at night," said a third.

Then they were silent and stared at the two and settled comfortably on the warm earth, on this earth that belonged to them and that no one could take away from them.

Hilpert and Lacoste saw the farmers' faces and sensed the hostility in their eyes. There was nothing to do about that. They could not help it that these people hated them. They had not invented the usurer's trade; they were not forcing their money on anyone. Everyone had the right to accept it or refuse it, as he pleased. Everyone could find his own salvation. And everyone could croak in his own way. What did they care? Had anyone bothered about them? Had anyone ever asked whether they had enough to eat? Never, not once. If your luck was bad you fell by the wayside, even if you worked twenty-four hours a day. And if your luck was good you made money without lifting a finger.

It was bad luck when locusts came, when you didn't have enough money to last out a bad year; if your garner was empty and you starved in the winter and sold your stock. No one could help that. It wasn't decided here on earth that locusts were going to come. God in heaven did all that. All that fitted into an established plan, and under the plan the pious and the righteous generally came off second best. Was that the fault of two old men? Could you blame them for an inscrutable quirk in the divine plan? Should they be tadpoles when others were sharks? Or martyrs, when they might be crucifiers? They were smarter than the others; they were more cunning and knew more. They saw nothing pleasurable in growing wheat and starving at the same time, or in planting trees that wouldn't bear fruit for three years. It seemed childish to them to have the hail destroy your crop ten times and to start all over again every time. Could they help it that the world was made up of fools? Could they help it that these farmers wouldn't sell their land and gather bones or dig gold, or take their whole family into a factory where they knew what they were getting at the end of the week, in dollars and cents; in hard cash that meant something everywhere? In real hard cash that they could exchange for silver or gold if they liked?

Let them gape. They would be eating out of the hands of two old men one of these days. They'd put on their Sunday outfits one fine day when they couldn't pay the interest and had to ask for more time. They'd wring their hands and there'd be tears in their eyes. And they'd invoke the Lord and all His host.

No, we're sorry, my dear fellow, it's impossible. Just impossible. Against the rules. Interest must be paid; there it is in the contract. Where you sign, there you lie. No, with the best will in the world, it just isn't possible. Yes, too bad. Hard, we know. Cruel, after you've lived fifteen years on this land; after you've won it from the prairie by your own sweat. Yes, you know every tree and stone. Your children were born in this room and your cow in this stall. Yes, yes, it's unjust. But that's the

way it is in this world. That's the way it is and there's nothing we can do about it. None of us, neither you nor I; you'll have to leave the land and if you don't go of your own free will we'll get the sheriff. That's as simple as ABC. Simple, and there's nothing you can do about it because right is right. You're as nothing in the face of the law. Can't do without law. Without it, no one would pay his debts and so no one would lend anything and then you and all the rest of the world would be in a fine fix. . . .

For a long time the two old men looked toward the farmers, until their eyes saw nothing but a haze. They rubbed their eyes, but the haze remained. It was behind the Mennonites, like a distant cloud suspended over the valley.

It lay in the direction of the wind and shifted across the summer landscape. The edges were jagged and the centre heavy; and it stretched straight to the horizon.

The old men shivered and began to descend the mountain. The farmers looked after them until they were out of sight.

Then they turned their heads and looked up to the sky.

The third swarm resembled the first, although it came more slowly because the wind was slower.

It did not arrive so dramatically, but it was at least as large as the other two put together. It came in five regiments, because in the neighbourhood of Scott's Bluff a local thunderstorm had forced it to land in a clearing.

The Shoshone Indians lived in this clearing; and because they were hungry they fell upon the locusts the moment the sun shone again. They applied the same system that the Millers had used in their garden. They dug a deep hole and formed a circle around it, the women standing next to the men and the children beside the old grandmothers; all the Indians who could move at all were in the clearing. With sticks and switches they drove the locusts before them, and whenever the hole filled they shovelled their prey into sacks. The sacks were dragged to one side where the medicine men stood before their tents, holding their hands above their eyes and watching the business; they were the only ones in the tribe who did nothing.

For they had already done enough. They had sacrificed and prayed and marshalled all the magic they could remember. The Great Spirit had driven the buffalo from their hunting grounds and sent drought down upon their miserable fields. He had made the men lazy and clouded their eyes. He had confused their minds so that they drank the firewater of the whites and became like weepy women. In the end the medicine men themselves had begun to doubt the power of the Great Spirit. They had lain awake nights, pining and grieving over the future

of the Shoshone Indians, for the children of the tribe were sickening and their animals dying. But they had done what had to be done. And they had done more. They had given of their last strength; they had struggled personally with the demons, and they had won. They would have food. O Great Spirit, they would have food.

First the Shoshone squaws made a soup out of the locusts. They discarded the legs and wings of the insects and boiled the rest in water. It was a good soup, a strong brew that gave new strength to the men and made the women's eyes glisten; it filled the hungry bellies of the children so that they fell asleep after the meal, happy and satiate.

Then came the principal work. For days and days the women and children sat stripping the legs and wings of the locusts and throwing the bodies into a large kettle. And for days and days the old women formed a dough out of the mass in the kettle. This was then dried in the sun and carefully stored. For weeks and months the breads they would bake of this dough would keep hunger from the tents of the Shoshones, and this was good and the will of the Great Spirit.

The result of their work was that the locust swarm was riven and separated, and though it flew many hundreds of miles before it reached the hills in Kansas, it was never able to roll together again.

Patricia thought it was over when the fluttering and rustling in the roof and against the walls ceased and a strange silence followed.

They sat eating in the kitchen, Albert with the bottle of whisky in front of him. He had begun to drink when the cloud of locusts first appeared in the sky, and because they were so slow in settling he had all but emptied the bottle by the time the first locusts pattered against the roof. He shook his head. Now he saw no more hope for them. He knew now that two were too weak to defend themselves; that the only way now was to sit with folded hands, husbanding their energy, postponing hunger, to plan, think and hope—even though at last they would again be disappointed.

"It's stopped already," Patricia said.

"Maybe. And maybe that was only the beginning; maybe it was an advance guard. How do I know what it was? I don't want to hear anything more about them. I'm going to wait until it's over, until the last locust has fallen from the sky. Then, if I'm still here, I'll begin all over again. But not until then. Do you hear me? Not until then."

He sat motionless while he spoke. Patricia ran her hand through his hair and estimated the whisky bottle. She felt irritated that there was not enough left for a real drink. It would do him good to get a real drunk on. God's mercy, it would help him; it would help him get through these days without worrying himself to death. Then, when it was all over, they could start afresh. This struggle wouldn't take so much out of him and

he would have force in reserve for the real struggle. What a damned shame they couldn't even buy whisky in this wilderness when a man had to get drunk. Besides, they didn't have the cash to spare. Damn, damn, damn.

The locusts began to fall again. They hissed and hummed against the roof and walls, so noisily that it was necessary to speak loudly to be heard at all.

"So it's stopped," Parker said mockingly. "Do you hear how it's stopped? Do you hear how God's blessing descends on our roof? Do you hear how He gives benediction to His faithful servant, Albert, and to His maid, Patricia? How He rewards those who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow? How He raises the upright and the honest above all others?"

"Albert."

"Oh, hell."

Patricia pulled his head back by the hair.

"Don't whimper like a baby. Remember that you're not alone. You can't leave everything to me—the house and the barn and the ox and the fields and the baby that's coming. If you get drunk, well and good. But if you don't get drunk because there isn't enough whisky or because you need such a quantity before you're drunk that you should have remained a prospector to have cash enough to get drunk on—anyway, if you don't get drunk, don't be such a miserable, whining creature that you howl like a dog whose tail is stepped on . . ."

"Let me alone," Parker said roughly, reaching for her hand.

"I'd like to let you alone, Albert, but not until I've finished saying what I have to say."

"Shut up, I tell you, and let go of my hair."

"When I've finished. When I've said all I'm going to say. You're not going to try to break my fingers or wrench my arm out of joint. You know I'm carrying your baby; you know you have to be careful of me. You know that, don't you?"

Parker let his hand drop to the table. She was right, of course. He mustn't hurt her, and she knew it. She was using the fact that she was pregnant. Using it against him that it was his baby in her womb.

"You look as if you want to kill me, Albert," she said. "My father used to say the truth makes murderers. But all the same I have to say it. I can't let things go on as they are going." She released his hair and put her hand on the table in front of her. She lowered her voice, but he could hear her clearly because a section of the swarm had just passed and the next had not yet arrived.

"We're too weak alone, Albert. We've been struggling like mad, but there are too many of the beasts for us. That's easy to see; you don't have to be an old farmer to know it. We must see if we can find someone to

help us. We must get together with the others and pick out some piece of land, maybe just a small, a tiny piece. And we must try to save that piece and to keep it. If we succeed, then we can try to save another patch, and then another. Do you understand what I mean?"

Parker did not look at her. He watched through the window the locust swarm floating slowly toward them, and far in the distance he saw the mountains, chalky blue and restful.

"Who do you think is going to help us?" he asked.

"The Biebers. It's to their interest as well as ours. They have a baby and they're poor. Because they're poor they know how we think. And because they're poor we can depend upon them. They're strong and good people and they want to keep their land. And . . ."

"Suppose they say no."

"They won't say no. They'll know by now that they need ten hands and ten feet, just as we know. Or do you think they had no second swarm after the first and no third after the second? Albert, they'll be happy when we come to them with a proposal like this."

"Maybe. But suppose they say no, anyway?"

"Maybe this and maybe that. How do I know what we'll do then? But perhaps I have a plan for everything, because I won't let us be beaten. I won't give up what we have here; and I won't believe that anyone is ever beaten who isn't willing to be beaten. And I'm not willing, I'm not. Do you hear me, Albert? I'm not willing to be beaten!"

She sat with fist clenched upon the table, frowning, her lips compressed.

Slowly Parker turned his eyes away from the window. He put his big hand on her clenched fist and pressed it until her fingers opened.

"I'm a fool," he said, "a crazy bastard."

They sat together in silence and looked out the window until the last of the five sections of the swarm had passed and the sky was bright and clear again, as it was meant to be on a summer afternoon in Kansas.

When they went to the barn to hitch up the horse they saw that the ox was doing badly. He was obviously much weaker and his hide felt hot to the touch. He lay motionless, and when they came up to him his brooding eyes did not turn to them.

Patricia knelt beside him and stroked his broad forehead. The animal did not stir. He blinked wearily and his mouth was slightly open; his breathing was stertorous. His hide was straggly and without sheen; the bones stood out prominently, casting big shadows.

"I think you ought to stay with him," Patricia said.

"Yes."

"I'll ride over there alone. I'll be back soon."

"All right."

"You won't harm him, Albert, will you?" she asked.

"I think I promised you."

"Yes, I know, but if you see him getting worse—not even then. He isn't lost if we don't give him up. That's so, isn't it, Albert?"

"No, he isn't lost. But I think he's very sick. And neither of us knows what's really wrong with him. Maybe it isn't the leg at all."

"Patati and patata. As long as he lives he's alive and we'll take care of him. Remember little Michael. Mrs. Maxwell saved him because she wouldn't let him die. I think an animal is no worse than a man. God can love an animal just as much as He can a man. Maybe more—how do we know?"

While Parker harnessed the horse Patricia went to the well and filled a pail with water. She carried it to the ox, bent down beside him and tried to lift his heavy head. She put her arms around his neck; then, seeing she was too weak, she intoned, "Come, boy, come. A little water will do you good. Come, boy, come. You must be thirsty. Come . . . come . . ."

The ox gazed sadly at her, but did not move. She called to Albert to help her, and together they lifted the animal's heavy, weary head over the rim of the pail. Then he drank, and drank half the water without pausing. It seemed to Patricia that he felt better when she gently laid his head on the ground again.

"You must look after his leg," she said. "You ought to make hot poultices for it. And give him something to drink every half-hour. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to give him the rest of the whisky. It isn't enough for a drunk, anyway, and a few drops might help him, poor creature."

"All right, I'll give him the whisky," Parker said brusquely, annoyed at all the directions. He knew well enough what to do with the animal. She didn't need to think she knew it all and that he couldn't fight for the life of an ox just as well as she.

"Maybe I'll give him some bacon and eggs, too," he said. "Or kill a chicken and make him a fine, strong broth. In fact, he might like to nibble a drumstick."

Patricia shook her head. "Don't make fun of me, Albert. I'm trying to do the best I can. It isn't much, I know. But St. Francis knows I mean well."

Parker began to unwrap the bandages from the animal's leg. He did not look at Patricia. He heard her walking away, then he heard her patting the horse and setting her foot on the wagon; then the seat creaked and the brake screeched as she released it. He heard the ringing of the horse's hoofs against stones, the grinding of the wheels and the groaning of the axles, and after a while he heard nothing but the breathing of the ox and the wind's rustling.

Patricia sat more upright when she saw the Biebers' house in the distance. She must gather her thoughts. It had been so simple and clear the first time she considered it, so obvious that it hardly seemed necessary to make a speech about it. But now it appeared altogether different. There were the straight rows of vegetables already devoured, and the peas, with only their stalks surviving, and tomato plants that looked like pine trees stripped of their needles. And all this belonged to strangers. She had had nothing to do with it. She had given nothing to it, and these others had given all. The Biebers had toiled in these fields; the Biebers had hoped for the harvest of these fields, and at night the Biebers had prayed for that harvest. What had she to do with all this? How could she come and make a proposal to them? No, she and the Biebers could tend to their own fields, could defend what was their own alone. These acres belonged to them and who had the right to say anything if they were destroyed or salvaged? It was no one's business what happened. The Biebers had paid for their land; it was their property and theirs to do with as they wished. If crops failed, they failed; locusts were locusts and they had existed since Biblical times. No one had ever thought to change the existing order because of them—the order of Mine and Thine. The order that God Himself had established.

When Patricia drove into the yard she saw Betty Maxwell busy at the well. She had uncovered it and screwed apart the pipe that went down into the ground. At the moment she was cleaning the filter.

She turned when she heard the wagon. "Hello," she called, "do you want to see a real devilish mess?"

"Devilish mess?"

"Yes, that's what I said. Or don't you believe in the devil? I suppose you never imagined so many locusts could crawl into the pipe that they'd stop up the filter so that not a drop of water can get through. And after twenty-four hours in the water those same locusts are just as lively as the day they were born."

Patricia got off and tied the reins to the brake.

"How is Michael?" she asked.

"Fine. He's eating again. If only everything around here were as healthy as the boy."

"Why? Is someone else sick?"

Patricia walked across the yard toward the woman. How big and powerful she was, this Betty Maxwell. What hands she had, and what shoulders. And what a peculiar face. Like the face of a madam Patricia had once known. A kindly face she had had; the face of a woman who really wasn't meant for the business.

"Sick isn't the right word," Betty Maxwell said softly when Patricia came up to her. "Crazy would be better."

"Who?"

"Bieber."

"Why crazy?"

"How do I know? Sometimes I think I've gone off my head myself. This is a devilish mess, that's one thing I'm certain of."

"But why crazy?"

Betty Maxwell lowered herself to the ground and reached into the hole she had dug. She began putting the filter back into place, and talked without looking up from her work.

"Do you think it's normal," she asked, "to take up a prayer book and sit in a corner and pray instead of going out to your fields? Or fixing your well, or taking care of your cattle? Do you think it's normal to leave everything to an utter stranger who happens to be a good-natured ass? Why isn't he fighting back? He might see that his family has enough food in the house to last out at least the next day." She paused and spat sand out of her mouth. "What a stinking job this well is," she went on after a moment. "Not a single joint is sound. Lucky there was a filter in the pipe. A nice mess if the locusts had got down into the piston. I would have had to take the whole pump apart. All by myself, of course. Doesn't it make you laugh to see me sprawling on the ground like this? I suppose you think I'm a good Samaritan, come to help the poor, to sacrifice myself and be a benefactor to humanity. First I save the baby, then I fix the well. I guess you think a golden stool is waiting for me in heaven."

Again she spat out: "In heaven there's a manure heap waiting for me, that's what. I don't know what the devil I'm wearing myself out here for. But I don't want you to think I'm an angel or something. I can't stand seeing a baby die or a well that won't run, but that's all. That's all the goodness there is to it. All the rest is as rotten and stinky and rusted as this pump here."

Patricia stood gaping at the woman. Betty Maxwell blundered to her feet. The scar on her face was red and glossy and sweat beaded her forehead. She took the pump between her knees and began screwing it together. "I suppose your hair is standing on end," she said. "Nobody ever said anything like that to you before, did they? Well, I don't say it to everyone. I'm just telling you so that you don't come around asking for help, too. I haven't any help to give away. I'm not here to help others. A farmer's a farmer and he lives and dies like a farmer. What do I care?"

The metal of the pipe screeched and snarled, the horse stamped his hoof on the ground, and the woman panted with the effort of turning the rusty metal.

"And you have come because you need help, of course," she said finally. "Why else would you be riding around this damned country on a day like this? Well?"

"No, I came to discuss a plan with the Biebers."

"Well, why don't you? Why don't you go to him with his prayer book and say, we must do this and that to save ourselves. Say, you yellow coward, do you think God is an old woman? Say, you jellyfish, do you think heaven is a welfare agency? Go ahead, why are you standing here? Go and do it." She paused, but when Patricia remained there she looked around and then asked, "What's your plan? Maybe you'd better tell it to me first. Maybe I have to keep running things here until this locust business is over." She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and raised her head. "Listen," she said. "Listen, he's praying again."

The low sound of Bieber's voice came from the house. It was even and gentle, sometimes fading away entirely. All that Patricia could understand was the word Amen, repeated now and again.

"He prays in German," Betty said.

Patricia's head swayed from side to side in dismay. To think that a man like Bieber could be knocked down like this. A man who was a real farmer, who'd known the land since he was born. My God, this storm must be more terrible than she had thought; it must be something she could not understand at all. What had her father always said? The blind do not fear the lightning. Perhaps she was blind and did not understand all that the locusts meant. Perhaps only the men understood—Albert and Bieber and little Michael, who dreamed of them.

Betty Maxwell had turned her attention to the well again. She pumped stoutly but no water flowed. With a curse she went to the pail, which still contained a little water, and dipped a half-broken drinking glass into it. She unscrewed the top cover of the pump and emptied the glass into the pipe. Again she pumped, and this time the pump drew. The first jets of water that flowed were a muddy brown, but after a while the water cleared.

Patricia turned suddenly and strode toward the house. She felt the woman watching her, and she was relieved when she had closed the door behind her and stood in the room.

Clara Bieber was sitting on the child's bed piling little wooden blocks to amuse him. She turned when she heard the door creak. Her face was pale, and her dark eyes squinted as she looked from the dimness of the room toward the bright doorway.

"Oh, Mrs. Parker," she said. "Thank you for coming." She hesitated and looked toward the window, where her husband sat. Patricia could see only his back. He sat stooped over the prayer book he held on his knees, his head nodding rhythmically as he followed the lines of the book with the index finger of his right hand. His voice rose and fell, now loud, now whispering.

There was a fire burning in the stove, and Maxwell huddled by it, as he had the evening before. He seemed asleep in his chair.

"How is Michael?" Patricia asked in a whisper.

"I think he's out of danger, thank God." Clara put out her hand and drew Patricia down on the edge of the bed. "I've almost forgotten about that by now. Many other things have happened meanwhile. So many terrible things."

Patricia looked at Bieber, who was now praying loudly and distinctly.

"He's been doing that ever since the swarms this morning," Clara said. "When you try to talk to him, he doesn't hear."

"What is he saying?"

"It's German. He's asking God to forgive him his sins. And he asks for mercy and justice for his poor soul. His prayers are all mixed up. He begins at the beginning of the book and goes right on to the end. I don't think he knows what he's doing any more. He pays no attention to anything. For all he cares the stock might die and his child might pass away and the farm might go to ruin and I could go to the devil." She paused and looked at the stove; Maxwell had just opened the door and the glow of the fire illuminated his miniature face.

"But that isn't all," she went on in a whisper. "That's not the worst of it. I'm so afraid. I'm afraid of that little man and of the big woman. I ought to be grateful to her for saving my baby. But I'm afraid of both of them. They whisper together whenever they get a chance. I'm all alone with them since Heinrich's been like this. And I can't leave the baby for a moment. He might have another attack."

Again she paused. Maxwell closed the firebox door and the room became dark again. "I asked both of them why they're travelling," she whispered. "Each one gave me a different answer. And just a while ago the man talked to me. 'Mrs. Bieber,' he said, 'if you don't have any seed left, it won't be so bad; and if you don't have grain for the animals, that won't be so bad either. And if you have no meat and no vegetables for yourself, I can help you out. I can take care of everything for you. You don't have to pay anything. Just sign your name to a piece of paper. That's all, just your signature.' Do you understand that?"

"Yes," Patricia said. "For a little seed and fodder and meat and vegetables he wants your farm. That's all there is to it. It's the same as it was in the saloons. A pair of shoes, a dress, a little food and drink and a place to sleep, and you belong to them body and soul. They're worse than the locusts, that kind. They're vultures, hyenas, sharks. You must throw them out as soon as you can. Kick them out of your house, and be quick about it."

"But who will take care of the stock? And the woman did save the baby. I just can't . . ."

"Do you think I ought to speak to Heinrich?"

"I don't know."

"I have an idea how we can all salvage a little."

"Salvage a little? Isn't it too late to save anything?"

"No, it isn't. But I must have your help."

"Our help?" Clara looked toward her husband. If only he would stop, and be himself again.

Patricia got up and went over to Bieber. He looked up when she touched his shoulder.

"I am Patricia Parker," she said. "I'd like to have a few words with you."

"Words with me?" His eyes were glazed, and Patricia was unsure whether he saw her at all.

"About the locusts. And the fields. We don't want to be ruined, we want to defend ourselves. Do you understand me, Mr. Bieber?"

"Defend ourselves? Against a scourge of God? How can we defend ourselves against a visitation from heaven? We must pray, pray, pray; we have not time enough for all the praying we must do."

Again he bent over his book and his finger ran along the lines while his lips mumbled the words.

Patricia hesitated for a moment, then she touched his shoulder again.

"Each one alone is too weak," she said. "There's no question about that. When you work in your fields, there are only two of you against thousands of them. But if we join each other, then there are four of us, and if we pick out a piece of land that isn't too big, perhaps we can drive the locusts away. And then we'll go to the next patch of land, and so on, until we have a few fields cleared. Then in a few weeks we can harvest a little from them; we'll divide what we harvest and that may help us through till next year."

Bieber had stopped praying. He shook his head gravely. "I've thought of everything," he said. "I've lain awake at night thinking it over. I thought maybe we could draw a circle and dig a hole in the middle and drive the things into the hole. We'll clear a little piece of land, I thought, and in the evening we'll go home and rejoice at our cleverness and we'll decide what piece of land to clear next day. And then I became frightened. What will happen to the first patch? I wondered. Will the devil be so dull as not to notice how we've played him false? Will the devil go to sleep and not see that we're slipping out of his clutches?"

Bieber shook his head. "He'll laugh at us till his sides ache. He'll summon the swarms from the near-by fields, from the right and left and here and there, and in ten minutes it will all be just as it was before. And what about us? We'll run back and start all over again. We'll forget about the other fields. Just one, just one, we'll tell ourselves. We'll count the ears that are left on the stalks; and if we do have a few that ripen, it will rain when we want to cut it and the fruit will rot and the whole thing will have been no use at all." He paused and bent low over the book, whose pages were speckled with saffron spots and tattered on the edges. "We must pray," he said. "For a long time I, too, was

unwilling to believe it. I've always thought that a man should help himself. I thought that God had given me arms and fists for me to till His soil and not for me to wring my hands before His face. But I was mistaken. I must pray that He take the locusts away from us. Pray that He free us from this torment; and when harvest time comes and He has left me no more than a few spindly stalks of wheat, or not even that, then I must praise and honour Him as Job did. More I cannot do."

Again he began to pray. And again the little man opened the firebox door, bent down and threw in a piece of wood. The fire crackled and the chimney hummed, and the glow of the fire spread through the room.

Slowly Patricia went back to Clara. She was tired and at her wit's end. There was Albert. She would return to him empty-handed; and she dared not even tell him the truth. Perhaps everything was really lost; perhaps God Himself was against them. Maybe the only help was in prayer. How was she to know? Perhaps she should really pray.

Betty had finished with the well. She had cleaned out the stalls and watered the animals. She had cursed and growled all the while, but she had done the work as though she had done nothing else all her life.

When she was through, she had eaten ham and bread, holding the food in her stained, unwashed hands. She had chewed with mouth open and drunk whisky from a water glass. When her hunger was satisfied, she took hammer and nails and began to repair the roof of the barn. She nailed loose boards, tore down rotting ones and replaced them with sound planks that she found stored in a corner. Climbing up and down the ladder, she felt the wind under her skirts and the warmth of the wood under her hands. When she hammered, dust flew up from all the joints, and with it the mouldering odour of board that had begun to rot. Above the roof she saw the midday sky, and when she looked down there were the glistening nailheads. She hammered and tugged and set boards, and unknowingly she smiled while she worked.

She turned around when she heard Patricia crossing the yard.

"Well, what did he say?" she asked.

Patricia stood still and shrugged. The bright sunlight was painful to her; she felt dizzy and faint. Slowly she walked toward the ladder and the barn, where there was a little shade and something to lean against.

"What's the matter with you?" Betty asked.

"Nothing."

"Aren't you well?"

"Oh, yes, fine. Quite all right."

She did indeed feel better with the barn wall so close. Her legs could no longer support her full weight and she had to lean her head against the wall. But how heart-easing and body-easing that was. Everything was so much simpler when one did not have to stand alone, without

support. And it was good to know that even a barn wall was a support.

Betty Maxwell cleared her throat. "I told you so, didn't I?" she growled. "A saint like him is deaf to practical plans. He takes things easy, uses God as an alibi. I think if there is any such thing as God it must make Him sick."

"Shut up," Patricia said. She spoke without moving and with her eyes closed, because it increased her dizziness to hold them open and look around at the reeling earth.

"What's that?" Betty asked after a while.

"Keep your damned mouth shut. For Christ's sake, keep your mouth shut. You can't talk about Him that way in a country where the locusts have come. As though He's just anybody you met in a saloon and you can shoot your mouth off about Him."

"I beg your pardon," the woman said. "I didn't mean to offend."

She began hammering again. What the hell, she didn't have to tell this yellow-faced hussy with her half-shut eyes what she meant. He (if He existed) would know. He must be more interested in deeds than in words. And wasn't what she was doing pleasing to God? What was pleasing to Him if not to save a stranger's child from death and fix a stranger's well and a stranger's roof and work yourself to death for other people without getting anything out of it?

"I'm sorry," Patricia said. "I guess I shouldn't have talked like that."

She opened her eyes and steeled herself. She felt better again; the ground was firm underfoot and the air was no longer stultifying.

Betty had stopped hammering. She descended the ladder. When she came to a loose rung, she was about to swear, but reconsidered and merely said softly, so that Patricia could not hear, "Goddam."

"What was your plan?" she asked when she reached the ground.

"I wanted all of us to get together and save small patches of land. That would have helped a little. You see what I mean? All of us would at least have had something. And we would have felt that we aren't utterly lost; we'd have the feeling that we'd done something to defend ourselves. It's terrifying just to sit by. I think maybe that that's worse than the locusts."

She stopped abruptly.

"Well, and?"

"No and. That's all."

Betty swatted a locust that had settled on the wall of the barn. Her palm slapped against the wood and the insect fell lifeless to the ground.

"It isn't much," she said. "But maybe it's better than nothing. Maybe . . ." She broke off as the front door of the house opened. Squinting, she looked toward the door.

Maxwell was hobbling slowly toward them.

"What's the matter?" she called.

The little man rubbed his hands as though they were cold; his face was narrow and drawn. His lips were thin and his eyelids lowered; he seemed on the point of saying, "For God's sake, what am I, Homer Maxwell, doing on this lousy Kansas farm?"

"Why are you still standing around here?" he asked Patricia, without replying to his wife. "I think you heard what Mr. Bieber told you. He said we ought to pray. Pray and hope for God's mercy. That's what he said, didn't he?"

"Is it any of your business?" Patricia asked.

"Is it my business? It's so much my business that . . ."

"Homer," his wife interrupted him.

Maxwell paused for a moment. Then he resumed belligerently: "Why shouldn't our good Mrs. Parker know why it's my business? Maybe she'll be glad to know that there's someone to help her when everything has gone to hell. And everything has, you can take my word for it. Did you see the corn over there a few hours ago? It looked like a cornfield then. Take a look at it now. Or at the beans. The locusts have eaten the bark off the stakes the plants were tied to. They don't leave anything, Mrs. Parker. Not a leaf or a branch, nothing." He stopped and licked his lips with his pointed tongue.

"Well, why don't you go on?" she asked. "Why are you ashamed to say you've come to make money out of ruined cornfields and ruined farmers?"

"You had better be careful," the man said.

"Careful? Why should I be careful? I'd rather gnaw my fingers from hunger than take any of your money. I'd rather starve my baby to death than have it born your debtor. I know what I'm talking about, Mr. Maxwell. A burned child shuns the fire. My father used to say that not all vultures stink. Holy St. Francis, if only I could make them understand that—the Biebers, I mean."

She took a deep breath, and then she began to shout so loudly that even Bieber, in the midst of his prayers, must hear. "Don't sign!" she cried. "Don't sign papers you don't understand. Don't be fooled by usurers and swindlers. Remember that it's your land because you work it, and it's not meant for a stinking little moneylender. Don't let them frighten you with threats that you'll starve. Famish or not, you'll live through it because you're doing it for the land that belongs to you. That means something more than a hundred bushels of corn and ten dozen eggs a week . . ."

Her voice broke from tension. With tears in her eyes, she crossed the yard to her wagon. When the horse heard her coming it lifted its head and looked at her. She loosed the reins from the brake, placed her foot on the wheel and swung up into the seat. The horse bent forward, the shaft screeched and the wheels began to turn.

She guided the horse in a circle. It walked unwillingly, head outward, hoofs sparking against the stones. It was a good animal, but it was tired and preferred standing in the sunlight to drawing the wagon home over the bumpy road.

It stopped of its own accord when Betty Maxwell trotted up to the wagon. "We mean well," she said. "You mustn't think we're a kind of leech. Everyone has to live; some people live one way, some another. It's a mess, this locust business, a damned mess."

"I won't be taken in by you," Patricia said, giving the horse a light slap with the reins.

Betty Maxwell blinked. "Why don't you try the Mennonites?" she whispered almost inaudibly. "But keep your mouth shut about who advised you to."

She turned away and went toward her husband. By the ladder she stopped, lifted it, and put it down on the ground. Then she bent and picked up the hammer. Then she took her husband's arm.

All this while Patricia sat on the wagon seat wondering what to do. She did not notice when the man and woman began walking slowly toward the house. She held the reins in her hands, and the horse stood still as though it had fallen asleep. Now and then the muscles of its back twitched, when the gnats became too annoying.

Yes, it was a good beast, and the ox was a good beast, and the cow. Ought she really go to the Mennonites? It hardly mattered if you ate your pride and humiliated yourself. Let them laugh at her, if only they would help. Let them think themselves stronger and smarter. It would be a cheap price to pay for the farm, a cheap price for their lives.

She thought suddenly of Ginzburger, and she remembered what he had once said to her. One morning she had had a hangover and was in a mood to chuck chairs at all of Borden's pretty pictures. "Do you know the Bible, miss?" Ginzburger had asked her. "Shut up," she had said, then, repenting, asked, "What do you mean?"

"Because it says there: though Israel sins, it remains Israel." She had not understood what he meant, but somehow it had made her feel better, and it made her feel better now. She struck the horse with the reins, and steered it to the left instead of the right.

The road made a tremendous detour, and in many places it was no road at all; Patricia had to guide the wagon over uncultivated land bearing only half-burnt prairie grass, stones and blackberry bushes. Because this land was so lean, there were no locusts on it. Perhaps she and Albert could come out here in the fall, if they had no fodder, and cut the grass. The stock would eat it if they were hungry enough. It was good to know that not everything was ruined. Good that God let grow a grass so mean that locusts avoided it. For cows and oxen and horses might eat it when they had nothing better.

When she came to the road again, farther down in the valley, she fell asleep. The horse followed the wheel ruts, stopping suddenly now and then to sniff at a clump of grass growing beside the road. Each time Patricia awoke to slap it with the reins and say "Giddap."

The sun was already sinking. Albert might worry about her. But he would think she was still at the Biebers'. He would understand when she returned. He would be angry with her for being so humble. He would swear that he needed no help, certainly not from the Mennonites. But she would be able to persuade him. . . . How was the ox? Her heart pounded when she thought of him. Why did it pound? Well, she couldn't help it; it just did. It must have something to do with the ox.

The horse stopped and began eating wild oats that grew by the road. Patricia did not notice; she was holding her hand against her heart, and she was terribly frightened when a voice suddenly addressed her.

"Where are you going, sister?" The voice was gentle and quiet, and when she looked up she saw a thin-lipped, bearded old man wearing a brown coat buttoned high. He looked at her with a friendly, though slightly mocking smile.

"Good day," Patricia said. "I would like to speak to the mayor."

"I think our 'mayor' is still in the fields," Reimer replied. "We have locusts in the land."

Patricia nodded. "That is why I've come. My name is Patricia Parker."

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Reimer."

Patricia looked keenly at the old man for a while. "I'm Mrs. Parker from up on the hill," she said finally.

"So I thought."

"I'm really Mrs. Parker, with a marriage licence and church and everything. Not just someone who's living with a man and expecting an illegitimate child."

"Why do you tell me all this?"

"Oh . . ." She hesitated, brushing her hair smooth. "Just because I think it's important here to you people."

"It is important everywhere to keep God's laws, is it not?"

"Yes."

Again there was silence. The harness groaned faintly as the horse stamped.

"I can imagine why you've come," Reimer said quietly.

"It's kind of you to help me talk about it. You always think it's easy to swallow your pride and then you realize all of a sudden how hard it is. Then you can't do it unless someone helps you."

"There is no question of pride when you come to us for help in times like these. We are many and you are alone. Why should you not ask, Brother, will you help me? Why should it hurt your pride when you

come to your equals and say, To-day I am in need; help me as I will help you when you need help."

"It's very kind of you."

Reimer turned and looked toward the village. Already the sun's rays shimmered reddishly. A delicate blue-veined cloud of smoke hovered over the valley from the houses where old women were cooking the evening meal.

"Almost all of them are in the fields," Reimer said. "They've begun the work all over again. They're tough and hard and they won't let the locusts drive them to despair. They're making noise to drive the things from the fields. They won't stop until dark. I myself had to stop because I'm an old man. But my wife is still there. And to-morrow morning I'll join the line again, if God wills. And next morning, and every day until we've saved a little." He paused. "You don't want to wait until dark, do you? Perhaps you would ride up to the others with me?"

"If it isn't too much trouble for you?"

"I'm glad to be of help."

"I don't think I can ever thank you enough."

He clambered up beside her and took the reins from her hands. "It isn't worth talking about," he said, rather formally. Then, after the horse had taken a few steps, he added, "You have a good horse there."

"It's not bad."

"Do you have more stock?"

"A cow and one ox. We had two oxen but one died; the other trampled him to death when the locusts came. And the one is still sick, so sick. When I left he was breathing heavily. I think he has fever; he must be injured inside somewhere. My husband is making poultices for his leg. Whenever I think of it my heart pounds; I don't even know whether our ox is still alive. He's so awfully important to us. We have a hundred and sixty acres, but only a little of it cultivated. We're all alone, you see, and I can't work too hard any more. Just a little in the garden and the barn. It's silly a baby should come the first year, isn't it?"

"It is a blessing."

"But suppose the locusts ruin us?"

They were riding uphill now. The horse bent forward as far as it could and took short steps. The tugs creaked and the whiffletree swayed up and down, groaning when they made a turn.

"I don't think the Lord will permit the locusts to ruin us. The Scriptures say: 'For he shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also and him that hath no helper.' And are we not poor and needy and have no helper but Him?"

"And what about me?"

"You are not one of us, but you are His child, nevertheless. No better and no worse than we are. Simply His child."

"No matter what I was before?"

Reimer tapped the horse gently with the whip. "Giddap," he called. Clearly now the sound of pot lids and pans came from the hill. The wagon rattled and swayed and slipped frequently to one side. But the horse drew it steadily upward.

Patricia looked out of the corners of her eyes at the old man, who had still not replied to her last question. He sat with drooping head, holding the reins firmly. At last he nodded and said, "Yes, no matter what you were before."

The Mennonites had covered about four-fifths of the field by the time the two reached them. The line was thinner than it had been that morning, and the field was also thinner; the locusts had taken a terrible tribute of the grain the settlers hoped to save. The faces of the men and women were tense and gloomy. Schermer alone still seemed fresh.

"Well, Brother Reimer," he called, "who is the pretty visitor?"

Only then did the others look up to see that a wagon had come, with a pale woman whom none knew. Reimer got down at once.

The drumming and clattering slackened for a moment. But at once Schermer cried, "Keep at it!" The row stiffened again and the noise became as loud as ever.

The locusts seemed more obstinate than they had been in the morning, and often the people had to swing their cooking spoons against the insects rather than against their pots. Perhaps the creatures' sense of hearing had become inured to the noise, or perhaps they were different in the afternoon than they were in the morning. Then, too, the people were wearier and more impatient; they wanted to move faster. What did they know of the locusts' life? They knew the insects were capricious; that was an old story and nothing to be wondered at. Sometimes they devoured one wheatfield and spared another; why should they not be different in the afternoon than they were in the morning?

Reimer crossed the field until he found Miller.

"There's a woman here who needs help," he said, speaking so that only Miller himself heard him. He did not want Caroline or Lydia, who were standing on either side of Miller, to hear.

"Who?" Miller asked.

"Mrs. Parker."

Miller stepped out of the line and went aside with Reimer.

"Can we help?" he asked. "How can we help when we ourselves don't know what to do? These locusts are worse and more dangerous than any I've ever seen. And can we help a woman like that? Wouldn't it be better for them to go back where they came from and leave the land to the farmers, as we've left their saloons to them?"

"No. What does it matter to us what they were once?" Reimer looked down at the ground. With his heavy boots he carefully trampled two

locusts that were perched one on top of the other. "I see this as an opportunity that God has sent so that you can make good," he said softly. "It is a sign of God's favour, if you look at it in the proper light. His hand descended to prevent an injustice, and His hand is helping us to make amends for a planned injustice. Is that not something of a miracle, Brother Martin?"

His face was solemn, but there was a faint smile in the corners of his eyes. "I think we ought to ask Schermer," Miller said.

They called Schermer and conferred with him. When he heard he turned pale; then he laughed and agreed. After that they spoke with the others of the council.

Meanwhile Patricia sat in the wagon, holding the reins and staring blankly ahead of her. She clenched her teeth until there was a roaring in her ears; then she closed her eyes. She did not want to see or hear anything until the decision was made. For a moment she had observed the men's faces and she did not know what to think of them. They were taciturn faces, wooden, a little like saints in a church window. Could she expect any help from such men?

"My name is Martin Miller," a voice said near her. She turned and saw Reimer with another man whom she recalled having seen once before, when Albert put the Mennonites out of their house. He looked quietly at her, still holding the pot lid with which he had been making noise.

"I'm Patricia Parker, Albert Parker's wife," she said. "I'm very glad to meet you." She barely managed the last words, and after she had said them she looked helplessly at Reimer.

"I told the brothers that you've come because you think we can help you," the old man said. When she did not reply at once, he asked, "Could you tell us just what we can do?"

"I don't really know. But I thought, we're alone and there are many of you. If we could work together to save a small piece of land, then we could divide what we save so that we could keep our ox and our horse and our cow and ourselves."

"We ourselves are being sorely tried," Miller said. "We have many hands, but many hands mean many mouths to feed, and your farm is a long way off. We could not come up to your place, and you could not come down to our land. But we would like to help you." He paused as though searching for the right words. "We don't want to offend you, Mrs. Parker," he went on, "but will you accept our offer to share what we have with you when you are in need? We have faith that you will give to us when you have something to spare, and we would be honoured to make such an agreement."

Patricia felt the tears filling her eyes. Because she did not want to weep she sat biting her lower lip.

"You must not think we mean it as charity," Reimer said. "Whatever we give, you will give back to us when you have it, and for whatever you give we will do the same."

Patricia nodded.

"Do you need anything right now?" Miller asked.

"No."

"Is there anything else we can do for you?"

Patricia twisted the reins in her left hand and brushed her right palm across her eyes. "I think I'm a little mixed up," she said in a tight voice. "I should have thanked you long ago." She felt the tears running slowly down her nose and wiped them away with her hand. "I don't know what's the matter with me, I'm so silly. I don't even know why I'm crying. Up there at our place I think I'm the only strong one around, the only one with any sense. Because everyone else is crazy or half crazy. My husband is at his wit's end and our neighbour just prays from morning to night and is going to sign away his land to a moneylender. And Maxwell—that's the moneylender—behaves as though the place belongs to him already, and Mrs. Maxwell . . ."

She stopped abruptly because the clattering noise had ceased. There was an uncanny silence. The people were standing close to the end of the field; many were peering with hands over their eyes, and all were looking up at the sky, with faces flushed by the setting sun. Miller and Reimer, too, had turned and tilted their heads back; Patricia could see only their round, sweat-darkened hats. Then she, too, looked up at the sky. And with terror she saw the new swarm, vaster than all the rest, hovering noiselessly over the land.

One of the men began to pray; then another and another. Patricia could not understand their words, but she, too, folded her hands and moved the tips of her fingers to her mouth, as though she were kneeling before the altar of the Mother of God.

"Let's make a fire," someone cried suddenly, a broad-shouldered man of enormous stature. The praying people fell silent and looked at him, who stood in the middle of the row. "Why are you standing around idle, brothers?" he cried. "We need a fire. A fire."

"He's right!" Miller shouted, and began running into the field.

The others took up the cry: men, women and children shouted, "He's right."

He may be right, Patricia thought miserably.

She clambered down from the wagon. The horse was growing restless. She held the bridle at his head and patted his neck consolingly. She was alone now. Even Reimer had run off with the others to gather straw, hay and twigs. They picked up every dry blade, every smallest branch, cakes of dried cow flop—everything that would burn. But it remained only

a small heap. The stuff was wet and would not burn. It smoked for a few seconds, then went out. The big man had thrown himself flat on the ground and was blowing into the abortive fire, but no flames arose. There was only a tiny glow that the swarm would not even notice.

The horse took a few steps forward and threw its head back. Its ears were twitching and its flanks sweating. Patricia began to worry about it; she would not be able to hold it if it became wild. It might run down the slope, fall and break its neck. Then they would have lost their horse also. They must not, they must not. Perhaps the ox was already dead.

"Quiet, boy, quiet, be good, boy, be quiet," she murmured.

Then the animal reared up, heaving Patricia up with it. She felt the animal's chest pressed against her own, and she began to scream. She did not know what she was screaming, and no one understood her words, but Schermer sprang up and raced toward her. "I'm coming," he shouted, "coming!"

She heard his cry mingled with the grinding of her own teeth. She felt her nails breaking against the hard leather of the reins. She had drawn her knees up against her body, so that her whole weight hung from the lines. She must protect her baby. No, no, not the baby. My God, she must think of that. She must not let go, not be thrown aside. Hold on, hold on . . .

Someone seized the reins directly above her hand. "Jump to the side," a man's voice said. And then he spoke to the horse. "Come, come, boy, not so hasty," he said. "You're all right, nothing will happen to you when big Schermer is with you, nothing will happen."

Patricia had released the reins. She was sitting on the ground now, breathing heavily. The horse stood quivering beside the big man. Its legs were spread apart and its head lowered, but it no longer tried to break loose.

"Did you hurt yourself?" the man asked.

"No."

"You're very strong. You must be to have held on for so long."

"No, I'm not. I was able to because I knew someone would help. I don't know how to thank you."

"I know how."

"How?"

"Give me your wagon. Right now, give us your wagon."

"Our wagon?"

"For the wood."

"Wood?"

"So we can make a fire."

Patricia stood up. Her shoulders ached so that she could scarcely move her arms. "Where is there an axe?" she asked.

"Over there by the road."

She went for the axe. The others were still busy with the fire. A small flame had been coaxed forth. It was low, no more than a child's bonfire. And what they needed was a tremendous pyre.

The swarm had come closer. It must be terribly high; it would take time before it reached the ground. Perhaps it would be dark by then. Perhaps the fire would be useless for that reason.

Patricia began wrecking the hay wagon. It was a good wagon; they had bought it in Atchison and used it only once for bringing in the undried grass. The wood was dry and splintered well. When the men at the fire heard the blows, they came over and dragged away the pieces of wood as fast as the wagon was dismembered.

Someone asked Patricia whether he should wield the axe, but she shook her head. It was her wagon and she would have the destroying of it; it did not matter that her shoulders ached. And what good was a wagon for harvesting when there would be nothing to harvest?

The fire grew. Soon the flames were taller than the men, soon taller than the men's homes.

When nothing was left but the wheels, Patricia sat down on the ground and drew up her knees. She laid her arms on her knees and pillowed her head in her arms. Then she closed her eyes and listened to the people talking around her. The air was cool and the fire had a pleasant smell. If only Albert knew where she was. He must be mad with fear by now. He'd run to the Biebers'. Maybe Maxwell would have an idea where she had gone. But that would improve nothing; Albert hated the Mennonites so. He would come; he might come any minute. Good God, she must leave quickly.

She got up. "I must go home," she said.

"But the swarm is coming," said a woman who stood near her.

"My husband is waiting. He doesn't know where I've gone."

"It's getting dark," Miller said.

"I'm not afraid."

"If you don't mind, I'll be glad to go with you," the big man said. "My name is Schermer." He still stood holding the horse. He paused and looked around. "You can ride on the horse," he went on when no one said anything. "I'll lead him. What do the brethren think?"

Meanwhile the sky had become so dim that the swarm could no longer be seen. The fire's glow capered across the field and the smoke rose up high into the sky.

Reimer cleared his throat. "I think it wouldn't be a bad idea if Schermer, Kettler and Defries went together," he suggested. Patricia could not see his face, but she thought there was something odd in his tone.

No one objected, and so Schermer helped Patricia mount the horse.

"Thank you for the wagon, Mrs. Parker," Miller said, holding out his

hand. "Our agreement stands. What food we have you will share. You and your child and your animals."

Patricia held his dry, bony hand in her own for a moment. Then she asked, "What about the others? Our neighbours. The ones who will sell themselves to the moneylenders if we don't help them. Perhaps they have done so already."

Miller sighed. He bowed his head and stood silent for a time, while Patricia still held his hand and the fire hissed and crackled.

"We ourselves are poor, as God is my witness. But for my part, I will share with them too."

"We too," the others said.

So it was settled.

They were halfway home before it occurred to Patricia that not a single one of the men had introduced his wife to her.

This time the valley of Gnadenau was spared the worst of the locust swarm. Locusts fell upon the fields of the Mennonites only as a drizzle of rain shaken from a passing storm. The ground was almost dark when they came, though there were still rifts of light in the sky. They pattered into the wet grass and among the leaves of the trees, and because the dew of night settled at once upon their wings and legs they could not cling, but rolled to the ground like ripe acorns in autumn.

When Patricia and her three companions reached the upper part of the hill, the wind strengthened and the hail of locusts grew thicker. It took two men to hold the horse, which tried again and again to break loose. They had to scream to make themselves heard, and when they walked in the face of the wind they lowered their heads, closed their eyes and compressed their lips, so that they could not talk at all.

As they were passing Bieber's house, Patricia saw that a light was still burning in the kitchen. She bent down and touched Schermer's arm.

"Stop a minute!" she shouted.

Schermer said whoa and leaned back against the reins. The horse took two short steps, tossed its head and stood still.

The men helped Patricia dismount.

"Excuse me," she said. "I'll be only a minute. These are our neighbours, the Biebers." She ran across the yard and opened the front door without knocking.

The air in the room was warm and redolent of many odours. The lamp was burning; Bieber sat at the table beside his wife, with the Bible between them. The man's finger was following the lines and his lips murmuring the words he was reading. The two Maxwells were squatting in front of the stove. They had taken off their shoes and stockings and were bathing their feet in a tub of water. The baby was asleep in the bed.

"Mrs. Parker," Clara exclaimed. "For God's sake, Mrs. Parker, where are you coming from at this hour?"

"From Gnadenau. Has my husband been here?"

"Your husband?"

"He doesn't know where I've gone. Wasn't he here to ask after me?"

"No."

"He wasn't here?"

"I didn't see him."

"No, nobody was here," Betty Maxwell said.

"Then . . ." A wave of faintness passed over her and she leaned against the door. The wind cast locusts over her shoulders and into the room. The people in the room shivered.

"Close the door," Maxwell barked. When Patricia stood motionless, Betty Maxwell took her big feet from the tub and stood up. Her toes left dark trails of water on the floor as she approached Patricia.

"Come in," she said, taking Patricia's arm. "In or out, but not in the doorway."

Patricia allowed herself to be drawn into the room. The woman closed the door behind her.

"Then something's happened to him," she said. "Holy St. Francis, something's happened to him."

Her knees felt weak and her hands were damp; the floor was swaying under her, but she had nothing to lean against because she was now standing in the middle of the room.

Bieber was gazing intently at her, his finger still resting on the line at which he had stopped reading. That was what happened to people who raced around trying to pull the thorns out of their hide. The devil entered their souls and created unrest in their hearts. Hell reached out for them and pressed the blood out of their cheeks and the breath out of their lungs.

"You must pray," he said softly. "What good is it for you to run around after your plans when God sends His swarms in the night?"

Patricia took Betty Maxwell's arm. "Help me out," she whispered. "My horse and the Mennonites are outside to take me home." Then she turned to the Biebers again. "Maybe I'm done for," she said. "I don't know. But—don't sign anything. Don't sign because the Mennonites will help us. Without interest and without security, without our losing everything. Just because they're our neighbours and because they're farmers. That's why, as God is my witness, that's why."

Betty Maxwell led her out to the men and the horse.

"Take good care of her," she said to the men. "And if there's anything wrong over there, come for me."

"Why, what's the matter?" Schermer asked, not understanding.

"How do I know? Maybe something's happened to her husband."

"To her husband?"

"Don't ask so many questions, my boy," Betty said. She went close to the horse and put her hand on Patricia's thigh. "I have a feeling that everything's all right," she said softly. "If I were you, I'd keep in mind that I have two to take care of." She paused and took a breath, as though preparing a speech. But all she said was "All the time." When the horse began to move, she followed alongside with her hand still on Patricia's thigh. She walked along until they were so far from Heinrich Bieber's farm that the light had vanished from sight.

"They haven't signed yet," she said, "but they intend to sign tomorrow." She removed her hand and stood still; after the horse had advanced two steps Patricia could no longer see her.

The hail of locusts had abated and the wind was weaker now. It was possible to talk without shouting.

"Faster, please go faster," Patricia said suddenly.

"It's awfully dark," Schermer replied. "If we don't watch out the horse will break a leg. That's bad business."

"But something may have happened to my husband. Just because of a horse we can't . . ."

"There, there, take it easy," Defries interrupted her.

"Things don't just happen to people," Schermer said. "This is a peaceful neighbourhood. I don't think there's been an Indian come within three hundred miles of here in the past twenty years."

"And as for the others," Kettler said, "they're looking for better prey than a locust-ridden farmer. They're interested in things like the bank in Atchison. Guess how much money they have there? Someone told me . . ."

"Quiet, be quiet!" Patricia screamed. "Quiet, I hear someone calling."

They were quiet, but there was no sound except the wind and the footsteps of horse and men. "Stop for a moment, please," she whispered.

The men stood still and tugged the horse to a halt. It was nothing. Nothing but the sounds they all knew: the falling of locusts, the rustling of foliage, the creaking of harness and their own breathing.

They started again. The ruts in the road were deep and irregular here, and the horse stumbled several times. Schermer walked ahead of it, supporting it when its knees gave way and holding it upright when it slipped to one side.

They should have seen the light long ago if there was a light burning in the house. But nothing pierced the night as far as they could see. The bushes beside the road were like wild beasts crouching to spring, and every now and then there was a sound like something creeping among the leaves.

Now the outline of the roofs rose against the sky. The high line was the barn and the low one the house. It was deadly quiet. Or was it really

quiet? Were those not footsteps in the yard; footsteps they could hear even at this distance?

"Stop a minute," Patricia said.

Again they stopped and again listened. Again it was still.

"I heard footsteps," Patricia said.

"So did I," said one of the men.

"They were in the yard."

"Yes."

"Maybe they heard us."

They waited a while. "Shall I go ahead alone?" Schermer asked at last.

"No," Patricia said. "No, I want to go with you."

They walked on, and again they heard the footsteps. They stopped once more, and again the sound died, and after a while they realized that it must be an echo. The sound of their own footfalls being echoed from the walls of the house and barn. They laughed mirthlessly. Everything was all right. It was dark and quiet, but that was what nights were like; the wind was blowing over the hill, but that was all. Really all.

Patricia pressed her hand against her heart. There—that thing did not look like her home. It was like something dead, something left derelict because cholera or some other pestilence had infected it. A place where death inhabited the rooms and rats sported on the floor. No, no, that was not her house. Albert could not be here; he would have no business here. They must have gone astray. Perhaps it was a house deserted by a man who had fled from the last locust plague. Someone who had not been able to stick it out after his cows died, then his oxen and finally his children. He would have loaded on the wagon the little they left him—his scythe, his plough, the iron bedsteads and the pots—and cleared out, glad that he was at least able to come away alive.

"Don't you want to dismount?" Schermer asked.

"Oh, yes."

"Seems like a pretty house you have there."

"Thank you."

"Looks like the man who built it knew what he was doing." He helped her down and remained at her side after she touched the ground.

"Dizzy?" he asked.

"A little."

"Don't be afraid to lean on me."

Slowly they walked toward the wide-open door of the house.

"Seems there's nobody home," Defries said.

"Hello," Schermer called.

"Don't shout," Patricia said.

They went in and Schermer struck a match. By the light of the match he walked toward the lamp. The match went out, and Patricia heard

him lifting the lamp chimney in the dark. Then another match flared and he lit the lamp.

"Everything seems to be all right," Schermer said, looking around.

"Yes," Patricia said. She leaned against the table. The wood felt good to touch; the light was reassuring and the familiar smell of this room strengthened her. How fantastic were her thoughts of death and rats in this room. How silly. This was her home, and she was returning bearing good news.

She went to the bedroom and looked in. The bed was unmade, as she had left it that morning. She had had no time to do her housework. In days like this there was time for nothing, and sleeping even in rumpled beds was a luxury. Curious that she was no longer worried about Albert. The tranquil house made her sure nothing had happened.

Together with the men, she crossed the yard to the barn. Schermer carried the lantern. "Wait a moment," she said suddenly, before they entered.

She listened. She ought to hear the ox breathing. When she left the house she had heard it all the way across the farmyard. He had breathed so heavily, with such difficulty; she remembered thinking how sad it was that the animal must suffer so without being able to speak, without being able to unburden itself of some of its pain. But now it was still; there was no sound of breathing.

Something stirred in the barn—in the front, on the right side. Oh, yes, the cow. The cow was rubbing her back against the wall. But there was no sound from the ox. It was quiet, terrifyingly quiet. If the ox was dead, where was Albert? He would not be tending it, not making poultices for its leg.

She rushed suddenly to the door, and threw it open and ran into the darkness of the barn. She knew every step. She saw her own shadow in front of her. The floor shimmered with a brownish gleam in the light of the lamp that Schermer was bringing behind her. A few steps more and she would know. Yes, there was the ox. Massive, brown and motionless, utterly motionless. Dead. O God!

Something moved by the side of the ox.

"What's the matter?" a voice inquired. "What the devil is the matter?"

"Albert!" she screamed.

"Silverheel."

He sat up, and then she knelt at his side, threw her arms around his neck and wept wildly, wept as she had never wept before.

The three Mennonites stood a few yards away, Schermer holding the lantern. They did not know what to do or say, and so they turned their backs and pretended to be critically inspecting the cow.

"Come, come," said Albert, still not fully awake. He had tended the

ox as long as it was alive, and when it died he had drunk the last of the whisky and fallen asleep. He had pillowed his head on the neck of the dead ox and dreamt that he was in his bed and that it was both hailing and raining, so that the locusts would be either killed by the hail or drowned by the rain. The louder the new swarm rattled against the barn the more blissful was his dream. "There is still a God," he had mused. "There is still a God to show you hellhounds who is master in this world. A God who can hurl hailstones to break your necks while you're wolfing down the bread of honest farmers."

When he woke he found his wife weeping.

"I couldn't help it," he said softly. "I couldn't do anything. I tended him the best I knew how. But it wasn't the leg; it must have been something inside. I didn't even notice he was dying; all of a sudden it was over." He paused. "Where were you all this time?" he asked abruptly.

"In Gnadenau," Patricia sobbed.

"To see the Mennonites?"

She nodded. She was unable to speak, unable to say all the things she had planned.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why, may I ask? Why, may I ask, does my wife behind my back go to see my enemies? And why does she bring three of the fellows to my farm in the middle of the night?"

A tremor ran through Patricia's body.

"Albert," she said.

"Throw them out."

"Albert . . ."

"If you don't throw them out this minute, I'll do it myself. You told me you were going to the Biebers'. You said nothing about the Mennonites. I guess you had your reasons."

"They want to help us, Albert."

"I won't have any of their help. Throw them out."

Patricia wiped away her tears and rose slowly to her feet.

"Listen, you," Albert called to the men.

"Shut up," Patricia interrupted him. She stood squarely in front of him, her head bent toward him and her hands on her hips. "Shut up, you yellow bastard!" she screamed. "Shut up, you stinking coward, you lousy son of a bitch. You, who want to be a farmer, scared of a few locusts. You want to be a farmer and let your farm go to the dogs because you'd rather scrap with those who want to help you. Your wife may go to the dogs if only you can knock the teeth out of the men who once hurt your lousy pride. You ought to have stuck to digging gold and smashing furniture in saloons . . ." She fell silent and glanced at the Mennonites, who still stood abashed in the middle of the barn. Then she dropped her arms, shrugged and went toward the barn door. The horse was still standing outside. She took it by the reins and led it into its stall.

The men helped her with the fodder and water for the animal, and when they had finished she shook hands with each of them.

"I hope you're not offended," she said. "And thanks very much for bringing me home. And greet the old gentlemen for me. And your wives and sisters. Yes, your wives and sisters too. I was so glad to meet you all."

Then she left the barn without looking around.

When she reached the house, she put out the light and undressed in the dark; there were no shutters on the windows. She shivered with cold, and she was hungry and miserable. But she stood naked for a while, brushing her hand over her swollen belly and stroking her breasts.

She was not sure what she thought any more. Had she meant all she had said to Albert? Was it so important for them to keep this land, this hut, this miserable life of work and worry?

She lay down. The bed linen was tangled and the pillows were scattered around. After a while her eyes became accustomed to the darkness and she could make out the window frame, shaped like a cross. In all the rooms she had ever lived in, all her life, the window frame had appeared as a cross in the darkness. She lay still, with open eyes and pounding heart. Would Albert leave her? Shouldn't she have guarded her tongue better? Did a woman like herself have a right to say anything at all?

She heard footsteps, and then voices. Albert and the Mennonites were talking. She could not understand what they were saying, but their conversation was quiet and peaceable. Sometimes Albert would say "Sh!" so that they would not disturb her, and then the voices would be lowered and she could hear only a distant murmuring.

She stretched out, enjoying the warmth of the bed, and closed her eyes. The third day of the locust plague was over. Dear God, was it really only the third day?

At sunrise they buried the ox near the grave of his fellow. Patricia had gone along and sat on the edge of the little mound while Parker dug the grave and the horse picked at the wild oats that grew among the prairie grass. The air was keen and damp; Patricia had wound a shawl around her shoulders. She yawned continually.

She got up and helped Albert at the end, when he pushed the ox into the grave. She wondered at how earthy the animal looked when he lay in the hole. As though he was already part of the soil, and had never lived and been endowed with an ox's soul.

Then they went home together and washed under the pump. Patricia fetched a few eggs from the barn—which also served as chicken house—and they breakfasted. They were as tired as though they had worked all day. When they were through with the meal and the dishes, they looked at each other, wondering what to do. Parker had promised the

Mennonites that he would fight the locusts as long as there was something to fight for, and they in turn had promised to help him if what he saved was insufficient.

"Let's try the corn again," Patricia said. Parker agreed. They went out to the field and again they began driving the locusts with sticks and trampling them underfoot. The sun warmed and the grass dried out; the locusts began fluttering in the air. There was a strong odour of locust excrement, of dried leaves and drying corn fibre. Gradually the air grew dusty over the field. The soil was lumpy and cracked when they trod on it. Patricia's arms still ached, her feet were hot and her face smarting with sweat. It was a rotten day, a rotten, sickening day.

While Patricia and Albert worked in the cornfield, Bieber sat at his window and prayed. Clara was in the barn milking the cow and Betty Maxwell was walking the fields to see how much damage the locusts had done. The little man sat stooped over the table, writing. He used a long quill and his own ink to draft his small, delicate letters; he always carried pen and ink since he had discovered that the farmers almost never had either in their houses. He was frowning because he was thinking of all the valuable time they had lost at this farm. It was all Betty's fault; she had simply refused to go on; she'd got hipped on these idiot farmers and their dirty cattle and their miserable farm. The Lord knew how much business they had lost in the meantime. One thing was certain—things weren't going well, not at all.

But it would be over soon; he'd sworn this was the last day. He would put the pen in the hand of that man at the window and make him write. Sign, Mr. Bieber, sign, sign. Sign, because if you don't you'll starve. You and your wife and your baby. Sign. Sure, Mr. Bieber, the terms are all right. The usual terms. You don't have to read the whole thing through; you can depend on me. Credit is a matter of confidence, after all. If I didn't have confidence in you, I wouldn't give you the money. No matter how many times you signed. A contract doesn't mean anything if the signers aren't honest men. Anyone can get out of a contract if he really wants to; there are a million loopholes in them all. Interest? Of course you must pay the interest. What do you think it costs you to borrow money from the National Bank? If you could, I mean. If you could fill out all the questionnaires they have and tell them all they want to know. They find out how many hairs you had on your head when you were born, let me tell you. What, they say, you have locusts on your land? My dear sir, what do you think we are? Do you imagine we're a charitable institution? Or speculators? Or swindlers who will risk their clients' money? Sorry, my dear sir, sorry. No, nothing, nothing, not a cent. Risk our money in locust country? Our money? Not a chance. Sorry. Yes, your wife will starve, your child will starve. We know, we

know. But that's the law of Nature; the weak are eliminated and the strong allowed to live. We're on the side of the strong, Mr. Bieber.

Yes, that's what the banks will tell you. But not me. I say, I trust you. I think you can pay two per cent. a month easily. Two dollars for a hundred dollars. I can see you coming to me next year and paying back the whole loan. You'll laugh at me. What a soft-hearted fool he must be, that Maxwell—I would have paid him three per cent. if he'd asked me. When the locusts are on your land you're glad to pay five per cent., ten per cent.

So the little man sat dreaming and writing, while the locusts ate all that was green in the land and Clara, milking the cow, sighed because she gave only seven quarts. It was warm and lulling in the barn, and the sun shone through the dirty little windows.

At this time George Hilpert and Francis Lacoste were sitting on boxes in front of their grimy tent and whispering with Philip Kettler, who had come secretly to see them.

They spoke in serious tones, but Kettler laughed steadily in his habitual manner and nodded his long head. When he stopped talking, his mouth remained slightly open.

"We don't like dealing with one man alone," Lacoste said. "You are a community, and you can get money on better terms if you take it all together. Much better, much, much better terms."

"So?"

"Yes," Hilpert said. "Because there's more security. You can see how much less risk there is for us. Just figure it out. One man can die. He can fall from a ladder and break his legs. Or he can start drinking. But not a whole village. You see?"

"Yes."

"Or take the locusts. One man, when he's alone, can be eaten out by the locusts. But not a whole village. A community can fight them. The people can work together and help each other out. That's right, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"Well, then, you see," Lacoste said, handing Kettler a bottle. It was hot, and Kettler was thirsty from all the talking; he took several long drinks. He was not the kind that couldn't take it. Secretly he had always drunk a little. What harm for a grown man if he took a little now and then?

"Are you in the council?" Hilpert asked, his mournful eyes fixed on the young man.

"No."

"I suppose all the old codgers are in the council. People who don't move with the times. That's it, isn't it?"

"Most of them are old."

"It's the same everywhere till the day comes when the youngsters step up and take things in hand. We're fairly old ourselves. But we realized long ago that youth has a right to act for itself. It just doesn't do to have the old folks make all the decisions. Of course, experience is all very fine. But when it comes to quick decisions—to emergencies—to something new—it's pretty much up to the youngsters."

"Then you won't give any money to me alone?"

"We wouldn't like to. Because the terms wouldn't be good. We wouldn't want you to take too much of a burden on yourself. That's so, isn't it, Lacoste?"

"By God, that's so," Lacoste agreed, again handing the bottle to Kettler.

"And you think I could talk the others into it?" the Mennonite asked, wiping away a few drops of whisky that had spilled on his chin.

"Easy," Hilpert answered, standing up. "You can see for yourself. You go around the village and naturally you don't tell anyone you've spoken with us. You just say, We're about ruined, brothers. Your children are hungry, your cattle are dying, you say. You'll develop consumption and never be able to till your land again. The old men in the council—it's easy for them to talk. They're through with this world, anyhow, and before long the Lord will call them to Himself. But we—we young fellows? We want to build up a new life. Do we have to perish because the old men are too proud to take a loan? They still live in the past, when it was a disgrace to borrow money. Fifty years ago. But why not? Does money spoil the ground; does it turn the soil sour? On the contrary. It fills your belly, and after you've eaten you can work; a hungry man gets feeble; a starving man lets his land go to rack and ruin; and a dead man has no more than his six feet of land."

Kettler nodded. He got up slowly and heavily. His head buzzed, but he believed the man. Something must be done. They'd have to give it to the oldsters, and give it to them right. Kick them out of their office. Get rid of them. Maybe even by force. Yes, if necessary, by force. God would approve; God would have nothing against such an action. God gave men the right to save their lives.

He belched. The taste of the whisky rose from his stomach and brought tears to his eyes. He wasn't feeling too well. It must be the heat. And his new anxiety, since these men had opened his eyes, had shown him how perilous their situation was. He would act, as quickly and as well as he could. Down with the council. You must cut away the foul part of an apple, and break down a rotten beam before it collapsed of itself.

He bade good-bye to the men and set out with heavy, unsteady steps toward the village. As he walked he murmured to himself. Passing along the foot of the hill he heard the distant noise of pot lids and box covers. They were out in the meadow again, all of them. Stupid idiots. Godless

fools. Except for a few old women, no one would be in the village. There was no sense speaking to the old women. He would sleep until the others returned in the evening.

He yawned and walked even more slowly, dragging his feet along the ground. The two old men could still see the dust his feet had roused long after he himself had disappeared around a bend.

Then they turned their heads and looked at each other, with something resembling a smile in their mournful eyes. They took a deep breath and the nostrils in their long noses distended.

At this time Jeremiah Kentrup, riding beside the covered wagon, crossed the border of McPherson County.

The horses were weary from their long journey and walked slowly; the wagon wheels turned at deliberate pace. It was hot, and Johnny had rolled back the canvas roof of the wagon so that Agnes could see the sky and get a little fresh air. Now and then Johnny got down and walked beside the horses. For hours at a time the men did not talk, in order not to disturb Agnes while she slept.

She had become more ill from day to day. Her eyes were unnaturally large, her nose narrow, and the shadows of night had settled into her features. Her hands were frail, the bones of her fingers shimmered like ivory through the skin. Her voice had become wholly gentle and patient; she laughed a great deal, and whenever she laughed she had to cough.

She had forbidden the men to worry about her attacks, and so they pretended not to hear and looked the other way until it was past. Then she clapped her hands to tell them that she was all right again.

When they came across the first locusts, Jeremiah had dismounted and taken a handful of insects to show to Agnes. She had glanced at them and then turned her head away.

"Take them away," she had said. "Take them away; I can't bear to look at them."

Dismayed, Jeremiah had clenched his hand and crushed the creatures. "Forgive me, sister," he had said.

She had looked at him and a shudder had coursed through her body. Her face had lost what little colour it had had. "They remind me of dying," she had whispered.

Since then the men had done their best to protect Agnes against the sight of locusts.

As yet they had travelled only a few hours' journey into the locust country. At dusk on the previous evening they had witnessed the descent of the first swarm, which had appeared out of a clear sky, without their noticing its approach. They had been busy making camp for the night when it began. Johnny had crawled into the wagon beside Agnes, and

Jeremiah had posted himself near the horses and tried to calm them. He had talked to them and patted their necks, and in the beginning his words seemed to have power over their fear. But when the locusts thickened into a pattering hailstorm, the horses had begun to rear up as though the devil was riding them. Jeremiah could do nothing but flee from the range of their flying hoofs and wait until it was past. Then he had rubbed the animals dry and thanked God for his foresight in persuading Johnny Brown to buy stout rope in Denver. The lines had held; they had been more effective than all his words.

They had not slept well that first night in the locust country. Awakening early, they had found Agnes quiet, pale and sorrowful. The arrival of the swarm must have had some deep significance to her. She spoke as though she had always known it would come; and most of the time her eyes held tears, even when she laughed.

They were now riding through country where the locusts were ankle-deep. Obviously many swarms had settled here; this mass could not be composed of insects from a single swarm. Compared to these, the locusts in Bear Lake County had been sparse. They had not infected the air with their stench, and the sound of their feeding had not drowned out all the normal sounds of the day. Neither had they gnawed the bark from trees until they were white as sun-dried bones. They had not moved like a lava stream; nor had they surcharged the air so that they fluttered against the nostrils when one breathed. In Bear Lake County they had still been the creatures of God, whom the Lord had given to men as companions upon the earth; here they were like some excrescence of hell that had suddenly burst to fill the earth with their stench and their horror.

Jeremiah shuddered. Walking beside the horse, his feet trod upon locusts and crushed them as though they were clods of earth in a dry field. His beard gleamed red in the sun, his head was lowered and his eyes were fixed on the ground. The smile was now only a faint, lingering twist at the corners of his mouth; his eyes were grave and slightly inflamed because he had not slept all night. He listened to the promptings of his conscience for some consolation, but there was only the desolation in his heart and, without, the sound of locusts at their feeding, or now and then Johnny's voice as he murmured something to Agnes. She lay under a mosquito netting, listening and saying little, but when she spoke in her low voice, Jeremiah heard her more clearly than everything else.

She was going to die; all three of them knew this. They thought of it from morning to night, and dreamt of it in their sleep. Many nights they lay awake, not stirring so that the others would not know, staring into the darkness. But none of them ever said a word to the others about it.

Many times Jeremiah had prayed for her, but always he had realized a little later that God had not heard his prayers and that his words

were in vain. God did not hear many other things he said; Jeremiah was alone and did not even know whether he was on the right path. Perhaps the Lord had turned His face from him, having grown weary of his sinfulness. Or it might be that the Lord still spoke to him and the unrest of his own heart, his anxiety for Agnes, had stopped his hearing.

Toward noon they stopped and built a fire.

"How long are we going to keep wading through this mess?" Johnny asked.

"I don't know," Jeremiah whispered.

"You don't know?"

"No, I do not know."

"What sort of secrets do you two have?" Agnes asked from her bed in the wagon.

"We have no secrets," Jeremiah said, going slowly toward her. It was warm and almost windless; the air was sultry, as when a storm is brewing. There was no living thing in the fields other than the locusts, and no house far and wide. But this was cultivated land; wagon trails criss-crossed it, and here and there were long lines of heaped field stones or a ditch running between two fields.

When Jeremiah reached the wagon, he turned so that Johnny also would be able to hear him.

"I have something to tell you both," he said. "I no longer know whether or not I am on the right road. For a long while I knew. For a long while I felt that God was with me; I heard His voice and I obeyed His will. But His voice grew fainter and fainter, and at last I could not hear it at all. The messenger sent me to Kansas, and now we are in Kansas. But it is a vast land. The signposts of the Lord are only for those who see, and I am blinded. His words are only for those who hear, and I have become deaf. Perhaps they are waiting for us there beyond the next hill, and perhaps there are a thousand hills and a thousand valleys still to pass. I may have a journey like the Wandering Jew before I come to those who need my help, or they may be standing at the next turning of the road, looking for me to come. But I must tell you that I don't know. I must tell you that He is no longer with me, and that I am going to and fro on the earth like one lost in some dark forest. Perhaps He has guided my footsteps without speaking to me. It may be that He has blindfolded my eyes and stopped up my ears, but that He has led me by the hand without my knowing. I do not know. As God is my witness, I do not know."

Johnny squatted on his heels, and Agnes lay under the netting, gazing up at the sky.

"You are in the right place, Jeremiah," she said after a long while.

"I would wish it so, sister."

Tears filled Agnes's eyes. She did not wipe them away, nor did she

blink her eyes. After a while she said in her small, weak voice, "It is so, Jeremiah. I know it is so."

Three miles away lay Gnadenau and the hills where the Biebers and Parkers lived.

"What's the matter?" Patricia asked. Parker was standing with his hand over his eyes, gazing toward the west.

"I don't know," Albert growled. "Since this lousy thing began I see locusts everywhere. Sometimes I think the damned creatures have crawled into my brain. Really, I do."

He stood staring for a few seconds, then shook his head. "I dunno," he said. "There's something in the air that might be something and might not; now I see it, now I don't."

Patricia followed his gaze. Most of the small cornfield lay behind them, mantled in dust. This morning they had killed more locusts than the quota of all the other days. It had seemed to them that the insects were weaker, slower and clumsier than they had been before—like flies in the fall. But they might be mistaken. They still had fifteen rows to do, and then they would begin at the beginning again, and so on until night fell.

Once more they knocked down the clusters of locusts and trampled on all they could reach, and again the dust rose, sweetening the air with the dry, pungent sweetness one senses in the wind before a storm.

"It's disgusting," Albert said after a while, without pausing in his work. "When I haven't looked for a while I see it, but after I've looked awhile it disappears."

"I have so much dirt in my eyes I can't see anything at all," Patricia said. She spat out a locust that had flown into her mouth.

Albert laughed. "I once heard there are Indians who eat locusts," he said. "You don't seem to mind either."

"I'm not so sure. This last one tasted a little too oily. Rancid, in fact. Maybe it was stale."

They went on working, puffing a little as they stamped their boots and flailed with their sticks. Now and then they broke a cornstalk and cursed softly. But there was nothing to do about it; you couldn't help ruining some of the corn.

"Maybe we'll enjoy eating locusts some day," Albert said after a while. "Maybe we'll lick our fingers afterwards, and our mouth will water, anticipating our next locust meal."

"You're crazy, Albert."

"There must be plenty of fat in their bodies. And lots of energy—just think of what they eat all day long. Corn leaves and wheat and oats and lettuce and peas and God knows what else."

"Shut up."

"What for?"

"Because I can't stand it."

"Because you keep on thinking we'll get something out of a field of measly corn like this. You think we'll fatten ourselves all winter on corn muffins and corn-meal mush and johnnycake. And while we're doing this we're ruining as much corn as the locusts."

"Albert."

"Isn't it so?"

"Even if it is, you shouldn't say it."

"Why not, may I ask?"

"Because it isn't true. Because we have help."

"The devil with the help."

"You didn't say that last night."

"Well, I do now. I'm sick of it. I don't see the sense in it. We can't see it through and the best thing we can do is throw up the whole lousy dump and get out."

Patricia stood still. "Do you think it's kind to talk that way about something I've set my heart on?" she asked.

Again Parker lifted his hand to his eyes. But he no longer needed his hand; it was quite clear that a new swarm was approaching.

"Look over there," he said.

Patricia looked up. When she saw what it was, a wave of faintness passed over her. She grasped at the cornstalks in front of her, and the cornstalks cracked with a sharp report, and then Patricia did not know what was happening.

"Patricia!" Parker cried. "Hey, Patricia!" He knelt beside her on the ground, opened her dress and ran for water. When he came back, it was already over. Patricia was sitting on the ground and rubbing her head.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's because of the baby."

"Is anything wrong?"

"Don't be silly. Haven't you ever heard that a woman gets weak in the knees when she's in my condition?"

Parker poured out the water. "I keep thinking all this might do harm. I mean, do harm to you and the baby. You ought to keep still and not do any hard work."

"How silly," she snapped. "My mother had eight children, and do you think she stopped work for a day while she was carrying them? My father would have liked that! Sometimes she puked her insides out, but she worked till the last day. The only time she rested was for five days after. That was all." She stood up. "I think we ought to make a fire to fight the swarm," she said.

"All right."

"We have a pile of old wood and dry bark in the barn."

"We can use it for heating in the winter."

"The winter? I thought we weren't staying until winter?"

"Didn't you say you were going to stay?"

"Yes."

"Well, then."

By this time they had reached the barn. The swarm had become indistinct again; it was hard to be sure that it was coming at all. They went into the house and cut themselves two thick slices of bread. Then they went outside, sat on a box and ate the bread, scanning the sky until their eyes ached and they had to close them. The hens were picking around in the sand, eating locusts. They had grown visibly fatter in the last few days. For them it had rained manna. They would thin down quickly enough, and then he and Patricia would slaughter them, one after the other. They would eat chicken for twenty-five days. That was something.

It was warm in the windless air, and the faint cackling of the hens was lulling. If there had not been the swarm in the sky, they would have leaned their backs together and slept a little. But as it was, they sat dreamily chewing their bread and staring up now and then to look at the distant cloud. The horse coughed in the stall. It had coughed for some time, but since the evening it had got into such a sweat of fright at the locusts the cough had grown worse. They must watch it. Maybe they ought to do something for it.

"I don't think there's any doubt about it now," Parker said, standing up. He stood with head lowered, his tongue moving around his mouth searching out bread crumbs that had not been swallowed. "We'll make a fire. A fire to make them run." His voice was indifferent, with an undertone of mockery; he did not look at Patricia while he spoke, and between the sentences he picked his teeth with his fingernails to dislodge bits of crust.

Patricia stared blankly ahead, her hands in her lap. She felt that she herself could not stand it much longer.

"Yes," she said at last. "Let's make a fire. It's better than picking our teeth or making speeches."

She stood up and crossed to the other side of the barn. They would make a fire there, and the smoke would spread out over all their land. Then, if the locusts were very high, they would not see the fields, and the smell of burning would be unpleasant to their nostrils and their feelers. Did they smell with their feelers? Anyway, perhaps St. Francis would help.

Lackadaisically, Parker followed his wife. The devil only knew whether it was a good idea. But if you couldn't think of anything, you did what everyone else did. It was better than sitting and watching the hens, anyway, and if the Mennonites did it there might be some sense to it.

He went into the barn and gathered the scraps of wood that lay about everywhere. The grass they had stuffed into the sacks was getting warm. If they didn't take it out soon it would rot, turn sour. They ought to spread it out to dry. But then the locusts that crawled in through the holes in the roof and walls would eat it. Whatever you did was wrong.

The horse turned to look at him when he passed. It pricked up its ears and showed signs of restlessness. He must examine the ropes and make sure it was tied fast. He would not make the same mistake twice. And he must tie the cow more securely. Maybe he ought to take the hens in, too, while the swarm was descending.

When he came out he found that Patricia had raked together dried leaves, hay and bits of straw. She was now gathering the brush to which they had tied the peas. He had gone to some trouble to find all that brushwood, and it irritated him that she wanted to burn it.

"Let the brush alone," he called to her.

"Why?" Patricia asked, turning toward him.

"Let it alone, I say. We'll burn only what I want to burn, understand."

"Yes, Albert." She dropped the brush and came toward him. On the way she picked up every blade of dried grass in sight. Again and again she stooped; it must be hard for her, Albert thought, with her swollen belly. He'd been ugly about the brushwood; they probably wouldn't need it again.

"What an idea—burning the brushwood," he growled to her. "Took me a whole day to cut it. A fine farmer you are, wanting to burn good brushwood."

He went back into the barn without looking at her. He fetched more strong rope and tied the cow tightly to the beam, making knots that would not open. Then he put a chain around the horse's neck, placed the end links together and hammered them down with a sledge hammer. This time the animals wouldn't break loose. By God, now, they wouldn't break loose this time.

As he went out he picked up an armful of chaff. He threw it on to the small pile Patricia had raked together and began building a wigwam of wood around it. He squatted on his heels and did not look up. He knew Patricia was standing in front of him and watching him, because he could see her feet and her legs, and through her skirt her calves and thighs.

He looked up. "Don't be angry at me about the brush," he said. "I'm all on edge to-day; I feel like smashing up everything."

"I'm not mad at you, Albert. I think you're right; we'll need the brush next year."

"I don't know whether I'm right."

They looked down at the wood and sweepings, and then they looked at the sky and the approaching locusts.

"We're all right as long as we have a bed," Albert said.

Patricia laughed. "A funny thing to think of now."

"I always think of it when things are rotten."

She put her hand on his head. "If it's up to me, I'll always be with you," she said. "And for my part, we don't even need a bed."

Parker lit a match. His hand trembled slightly. "It's a pity Ginzburger isn't here," he said. "He has a prayer for lighting things."

The flame swirled through the hay and straw, and the leaves shrank together. Bluish smoke rose above the fire. The wind carried it toward the barn. Patricia squatted at Albert's side and began feeding the fire. She gave it only small twigs at first, then branches, and finally the boards and remnants of planks. The air around them warmed and the flames leaped high, while above them the swarm hovered menacingly.

When it was almost directly above them they were able to see that it reached from the zenith almost to the horizon. At its lowest tip it hung the height of a church steeple from the ground. The wind blew in gusts, and from every direction; sometimes it blasted the smoke back into the fire until their eyes smarted and their noses ran.

It took a long time before the first locust fell to the ground. It was a small, greenish-brown creature that lay as if dead on its side, near Patricia's feet. Before she could pick it up, the wind blew it into the fire.

"It's beginning," Patricia said. She listened, because she heard a roaring like the sound of heavy rain.

"Your fire doesn't seem to be worth much," Albert said. He threw into the fire a bundle of straw that he had been holding in readiness for the first locusts.

Patricia was still sitting with her head averted from the smoke and listening to the roaring sound.

"What's that?" she asked.

"You ought to know by now."

"Locusts?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's different." She grasped his hand. "Can't you tell it's different?"

It was different; it was something they could not possibly have foreseen. It came so suddenly that there was no way to find shelter against it.

It was no more than a tremendous gust of wind, an avalanche of compressed air; it consisted of layers of air that in the course of long wanderings had become so interwound that they had something of the nature of solid matter.

It struck them from behind, like a blow of a soft pillow. A moment before they had been squatting on their heels in front of the fire, and now they were on their knees with their arms outstretched before them, their hands clutching the ground. They felt as though they had been stripped naked; the wind rushed upon their backs and necks and legs, streamed down upon them like icy water. It was filled with dust and leaves and

grass, with small pebbles and bits of wood. Hissing and screaming, it seized the fire and hurled a thousand glowing sparks upon the roof of the barn and into the joints of the wall. Then it was gone, and behind it came no more than a small breeze that was cold as winter wind and no less steady. And this breeze stirred the flames until the barn was afire.

It happened so quickly that at first they noticed nothing. The blast of wind over, they rose to their feet. The bonfire was gone, and they thought it must have been snatched away in the great, driving wind. Then they looked up at the sky and sighed with relief because the swarm also was blown away. They ran their hands over their hair and neck to brush out the dirt.

And then Patricia gripped Albert's shoulder. She could not speak; she could only point. She stretched out her hand and pointed. It was a tanned, strong hand, with a broken fingernail on the index finger. A trembling hand that wavered in the air like a frightened bird.

"The cow!" Parker shouted. "The cow and the horse and the house!"

He ran to the barn door and ripped it open. The room was already filled with smoke.

The animals were wild. They were thrashing insanely against the wall. He heard them breathing in the pauses between the cow's desperate bellowings.

Quickly, they closed the barn door behind them. It was hot. Or was that imagination? The barn was always warm. Flames on the roof and walls could not make it so hot.

There was the horse. If only it would let him into the stall. It would kick him to death with its lunging and trampling if he came close now. "Quiet, boy, quiet, quiet, quiet. Nothing will happen to you. I just want to open your chain, that's all." O God, the chain—all twisted up now. You could see nothing in this damned smoke. Everything by touch. Damn damn, this was iron. A good strong chain—from Cheyenne. No rope, this.

"Get me the axe," Parker bawled. Patricia vanished from his side. The axe. It must be in the corner. Not far. If you followed the wall you couldn't miss it. There was the cow. Yes, yes, we'll help you, poor beast. But first the axe. There was the harness; they must take that along. It had been expensive. Everything had been expensive. They had chosen only the best. They wanted to have a good farm, a beautiful farm. The kind the agent had described to them. You can make sixty to eighty per cent. profit the first year. The axe, they must have the axe to save the horse from the burning barn.

She touched it with her foot and bent down. It was heavy. It was brighter in the barn now. Good. The flames were giving light. The wind must be coming in through a hole. She could hear it. It was driving the flames, spreading them.

"Here," she handed Albert the axe. He wanted to chop the ring loose—

the ring to which the chain was fastened. The horse had pissed. The pool of yellow brine had a pungent smell. The floor was wet and shiny, and slippery. The horse could not stand firmly now. Its hind legs slipped. If it fell now, all was over.

The wood that held the ring was like iron. He had used good wood, made sure the ring was driven firm. When he chopped, only small splinters of wood flew out. If only he could chop with the grain. But against the grain. Shouldn't he break the whole board loose? If there was time.

"Chisel!" he roared. "Chisel!"

The chisel. O God, where was the chisel? This smoke—it must be the sacks of grass. The grass they had hoped to save. It was smothering her, blinding her. Where was the chisel, where was the wall? Aha, here was the cow. At least the cow was still here. Soaking wet, smeared with manure. She must have thrashed around. Her hindquarters were on the ground, her head held high by the rope.

Patricia grasped the rope. Couldn't she loosen the knots? Fast, steel-hard knots, tightened by insane fear. The axe, they must be cut with the axe, Albert, Albert. The smoke made her cough.

Panting, she leaned over to vomit. The vomit fell all over the cow. But she felt better now. She must try the knots with her teeth. The rope had a sweetish taste, like corn. It was wet, wet from her spittle. It was wet, but it did not loosen.

"Go away!" Parker shouted. He had come up behind her without her noticing.

"What about the horse?" she shouted.

"Get out of the way."

She stepped aside and he struck the rope with the axe, using the partition as a base. Strands opened; the rope was thinner now. In a moment it would tear. In a moment. Could they get the cow up?

"Hit her," Parker bawled. "Hit her. Kick her."

She had nothing with which to hit the animal, and so she began kicking against its hindquarters and flanks. She kicked with the sharp toe of her boot. She must get the animal up. They couldn't drag her out; if she didn't walk she would burn. Damn you, if you don't get up you'll burn. As the horse is burning. Albert, Albert, you're not letting the horse burn?

"You can't let the horse burn," she screamed.

"It's dead," he shouted back.

"Dead?"

"With the axe."

Again she had to cough. She doubled up, but she continued to kick the cow. They couldn't kill the cow with the axe. . . . Not now, when the rope was cut. "Stand up, stand up, for God's sake, stand up."

"Open the door," Albert shouted. She could barely hear him, though he must be shouting at the top of his lungs. She could see from his red face and wide-open mouth that he was. It was bright as midday in the barn now. The smoke was pouring out through a hole in the roof; that made breathing easier. But it was hot, so hot. . . . Why did he want her to open the door? So that she would not see when he killed the cow? Maybe that was it. She had better stay.

"Open the door!" he shouted again. He was holding a lath that was burning at the end. He had leaned the axe against the wall. She bent down and picked up the axe before she went to the door.

She opened the door. And as she did so the roar of the flames grew thunderous; they pressed toward the open air. Parker saw them flowing together into a single mass of flame. He felt his lips bursting. He had to close his eyes for a second; the flames were singeing his lashes. He must stay on his feet. Just another minute.

He grasped the hot beam of the stall and tensed his muscles so that he could spring aside if the cow went wild. She must go wild; that was the only chance.

He poked the glowing lath at her flank. She began to thrash about. She bellowed and howled and tried to stand. Finally, she lurched forward on her knees. "Up, up!" Parker screamed, and burned her again and again.

She fell down, thrashed and panted and bellowed, tossed her head back and forth. Again she got on her knees, hammered the floor with her hoofs. Then she was up. She pivoted twice around and then she raced madly to the door.

As soon as Albert got out into the yard, he staggered. He must have water. He must go to the well and drink. He saw Patricia standing at the well, pumping water into the pail, pumping like mad. The smoke covered the whole sky; it seemed like an eclipse of the sun.

Parker looked up. And then he saw that the roof of the house was burning.

They fixed the long ladder against the wall and poured water on the straw. Patricia pumped and brought the water and handed it to him. "Faster," he said. After a while he saw that she could not go faster, and they changed places.

The fire ate in. It was burning from within. It burned, glowed and smoked, and when the wind came it flamed up. The flames grew, though Patricia steadily poured water on the place. But the burning area moved farther away from her. She followed to the middle of the roof, where the wind shook her footing. At first the stream of water had struck the fire when she swung the pail. But now it was too far away. And she was tired; she could scarcely move her arms. She crawled after the fire. She might break through the roof, fall to her death. But she

must remain behind the fire. She crawled over places where it had already burned itself out. But perhaps it was still glowing there; she felt the heat. Then she felt the wetness of the water she herself had poured on the roof. They couldn't lose the house, too. They didn't have much left as it was. But they had a bed and a table, a lamp and a stove, and four walls. That was enough to begin anew. Enough even to bring a child into the world.

It would have been hopeless if help had not come. Bieber had noticed the smoke in the sky when the fire was still small. He sat at the table with the Maxwells and was just about to sign the contract. Certainly it was not a bad contract; he could surely meet the conditions. He was sitting with pen in hand when the hole in the roof broke through and the flames shot high, while the smoke streamed out as from a chimney.

"Wait a minute," Bieber said. He put down the pen and went to the door. He stood there for a few seconds with his hands in his pockets.

"I think someone's in trouble," he said at last, and went to hitch up the horse.

Betty Maxwell rode with him; they took pails and whipped up the horse, following the direction of the smoke.

With their help the Parkers saved the house. And because Bieber was tired when they returned, he did not sign for the loan that day.

At dusk the Parkers' cow returned, and in spite of everything she had a little milk. Albert milked her, and they drank the milk and ate bread. When they had finished they went silently to bed. The mattress was wet and they had to sleep on the bare spring. They wrapped themselves in blankets and lay as close together as possible. The house was still there, and they themselves; they still had the cow, and to-morrow they would begin to rebuild the barn. It wouldn't have to be big. Hell, no, for a single cow it wouldn't have to be big.

When the sun grew hot, Johnny put down the roof of the wagon, leaving the canvas open at front and back so that Agnes would feel the slightest breeze.

She had closed her eyes and was trying to sleep. She had eaten little; she was not hungry. You were certainly not hungry when you couldn't eat ham and fried potatoes. When you were truly hungry you didn't long for milk and spinach in place of ham and fried potatoes.

She heard the men coming toward the wagon. Then they sat down and leaned against the wheels. She wondered whether they knew how ill she was. Did they believe her when she laughed? She was like a tired child carried by its father and trying to make itself light. She did not want the men to be cursing inwardly at the folly of carrying a sick woman across the whole land.

Land. She had not seen much of the land. Indeed, she had seen little but the sky. Sometimes the tops of trees had floated past her, or the roofs of houses. Often she had heard voices of people, and the rattle of wagon wheels. She had, in fact, heard far more than she had seen. She had heard what was not audible to those who could see everything.

She had heard the sinking of evening and the morning's rise. She had heard the locusts when they were yet far away. She did not know whether she had heard that in the changed voices of the men, or in the breathing of the horses, or whether she had actually heard the whirring of millions of wings.

The men were whispering now. Whenever they thought she was asleep they whispered. She wished they would speak aloud. It was disquieting not to know what they were saying. She coughed lightly and turned on her side. The men fell silent.

It was altogether silent outside, but for the wind and the locusts and, after a while, the breathing of Jeremiah and Johnny, who had fallen asleep. It was so wonderful to be with them; so wonderful to make your last journey under the roof of a covered wagon. So much better than lying in a bed in some city, smelling the odour of antiseptic, looking out on a stone courtyard and blessing the coming of dusk outside. It was good to find life more lovely every day, even when it was approaching its end. For a few weeks, at least, you have really lived. It was good. All was good, as Jeremiah said. All was good.

There was an ache between her shoulders. She knew she would have to cough if she moved, and so she remained still. Jeremiah's head, outside, must be close to hers. Only a canvas and a thin wooden framework separated them. Jeremiah, Jeremiah, you servant of the Lord, you who close your eyes when I look at you, you who are a man like all other men, and yet so wonderful and different that I long for you and weep for you whenever I think of you; and who are more in my small life than everything else has ever been, you who are greater and warmer and nearer than all else, to whom I belong with heart and soul and my weak body. Jeremiah.

Her face was wet with tears, but from remaining still and holding back her cough she fell asleep. When Johnny rose to look at her, she lay on her side with her head against the canvas wall. Her tears had dried, but her face gleamed still in sleep. Her lips were slightly parted, as though she had just spoken and neglected to close her mouth afterward; her white teeth showed, and on her cheeks were red spots.

Jeremiah had not awakened when Johnny got up. He lay on the ground under a thin blanket, his red beard twitched by every gust of wind, and locusts were crawling around him and on him.

Johnny considered whether to wake him. They must go on; they must end this damned journey that was so utterly without rhyme or reason.

He had been on his way to buy a herd, and instead he was going to see locusts in Kansas. He could imagine how they would talk about it in the streets of Cheyenne. Johnny Brown wants to buy Texas cattle in Kansas. Johnny Brown's got religion. Johnny Brown don't need no cattle; he's got horns of his own. Ha-ha, Johnny Brown has horns of his own . . . Lying sons of bitches, but that's what they'd say.

God knows, he never would have gone into this if Agnes had been well. He would have given the preacher a kick in the arse and sent him packing. But now here he was and his wife was sick; she was getting weaker every day, and more delicate; there were tears in her eyes almost all the time, and something strange about her face. It didn't look as though she was really sick, and she concealed her condition from them. She wouldn't undress before him. But when he lay beside her he could feel how she was—so frail and thin he didn't dare to touch her.

He went away from the wagon to their fire, which was still warm and glowing beneath the ashes. There was no sense in waking the preacher. They would not ride as long as Agnes was sleeping. Sleep must do her good; it must strengthen her. Perhaps she would be well again some day. This would all pass, and it would not be the end at all. They would have a ranch and a herd and children, and people would doff their hats to them; everyone would know that this was rich Johnny Brown who'd married Agnes Andersen, the schoolmarm.

The blast of wind that had fired the Parkers' roof was noticeable only as a gusty breeze where Agnes and the men were encamped. The only one of the three who remarked it was Jeremiah. He shivered and wrapped himself closer in the blanket. Then he opened his eyes and looked sleepily at the sun, listening the while for some sound from Agnes. But she seemed to be still asleep. Johnny was sitting at the fire with his back to Jeremiah; he was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his head between his hands.

Jeremiah closed his eyes again. He felt the spokes of the wheel pressing into his back and heard the locusts crawling and feeding greedily. The ground was hard and dusty; had he not been so tired he would have removed a small stone from under his hip-bone. But he was too sleepy, and gradually the little stone yielded under him, flattened and spread until at last it was like a large stone cradle rocking him softly back and forth. An old woman who looked like his mother and somewhat like Agnes Brown sat on the ground beside him and rocked the hollow. She spoke, but he could not understand what she was saying. Jeremiah tried to read her lips, but he was unable to. "What are you saying?" he asked. She replied, but again he seemed to be deaf; he could hear nothing. He leaned his ear close to her mouth, and felt his heart begin to pound because all at once he knew that what she was saying was terribly important. "I am deaf," he said. "You must shout for me to hear." The

woman shook her head and began to cry. She was too weak to shout. After a while she began to speak again. She was patient; she moved her lips as slowly as she could, gazing at Jeremiah so piteously and imploringly that his heart was rent. She seemed to realize that he still did not understand, and lifted her arms in woe, stretching them out before her. Her hands were as hands of ivory. And she tensely pointed the index fingers of her hands, and Jeremiah followed where they pointed, but saw nothing but obstructing clouds. Then he felt afraid, and the pounding of his heart increased; he became more and more afraid and excited, and at last he awoke.

Everything seemed to be unchanged. It was still and warm, and probably he had only dozed off for a few minutes.

His body was trembling. He had dreamed. Dreamed that a woman was talking to him and he could not understand her, though what she said was so important.

He got up and tiptoed around the wagon. He wanted to look in the direction the woman had pointed. He could still feel the pounding of his heart, and there was a faint rustling in his ears; he remembered that this had happened once before, in the Cathedral of St. John in Denver.

When he came to the other side of the wagon, he stood still. His breath stopped and his senses reeled. He leaned against the wagon and covered his face with his hands. Then he bowed his head and his knees yielded; he would have sunk to the ground had not Agnes called him at that moment.

"What is it, sister?" he asked, dropping his hands.

"I've slept so well," Agnes replied. "I think I'll get better if I sleep like that often. I'm so strong I'd like to get up. Where is Johnny? We ought to ride on."

"We have arrived, sister," he said softly.

"Arrived?" she asked breathlessly. But Jeremiah did not notice her tone. God had spoken to him; he was along the road and the time of silence was over, the time of erring was over. The Lord had spoken to him, and when he failed to understand He had pointed, and when he still failed to understand He had made his heart to pound and awaken him. The Lord had spoken to him. Hosanna, the Lord had spoken. The roar of His presence was in Jeremiah's ears and the humility before His greatness bore him to his knees. All was good. All was good.

"How do you know we have arrived?" Agnes asked.

"The Lord spoke to me, and when I did not understand He awakened me. And I went in the direction He had pointed, and then I saw and knew."

"What do you see, Jeremiah?"

"I see a cloud of smoke over a hill. It is dark and heavy, resembling a tree that grows mightily into the sky. Where it touches the earth it is

red with the light of flames, but high above it is black and its branches and leaves are woven into thick strands." He paused. "Do you know the hundred and fourth psalm, sister?" he asked. And when Agnes did not reply he recited softly: "He looketh on the earth, and it trembleth: he toucheth the hills, and they smoke."

Again he listened, waiting for her to say something, but when she remained silent he went on, as though speaking to himself: "I dreamed, and the earth trembled; I awoke, and the hill smoked. When I lay down to sleep, I was like an instrument that He had laid aside, and when I started up from my dream He had remembered me and taken me to His hand. For His is the measure of time, as are all things upon this earth and in heaven."

Agnes lay on her pillows looking up at the roof of the wagon. She had known that this was how it would be. She did not believe that it was God who had told her, nor that she was His instrument. She was sick and feverish, and in sickness and fever one knew more than others. One knew how meek and small was one's life, and how great and wonderful was life itself.

And one knew that it was over when this journey was over.

That evening, when Lydia walked through the village, she sensed that a new unrest had come over the people.

The swarm that had settled on the fields in the afternoon had been worse than the others; and it had brought with it something that had never before existed among the Mennonites. There was no name for it, but it was there; it compelled the people to answer each other irritably and curtly, to shun the eyes of their fellows and to be angry at their own thoughts.

This thing had come between members of the same family, so that each wanted to be alone and was a burden to the others. Every word was grating and superfluous; when people brushed each other in passing they swore inwardly and clenched their fists. The children walked on tiptoe and the dogs lay huddled in corners or under tables, afraid they would be kicked if they ventured forth.

Lydia sat down by the road. She drew her legs up against her body, clasped her arms around her knees and enjoyed the sense of warmth and protection that her own body gave. She was surrounded by broom, so that no one could see her, and she knew no one would ask after her or miss her.

The people of the village had not forgotten the Parker affair; it was ridiculous to think that because of the locusts they had suddenly lost their memories. Naturally, they had stopped thinking of it during the first moments of distress; they had smiled at her and looked at her as though she belonged. But by now everything was the same again, and her loneliness was greater than ever.

Her longing, too, had grown. It was as though she stood on a desert island, stretching out her arms toward every passing ship. She dwelt on a persistent daydream: that she did something wonderful and dangerous for the community, something that brought her to the verge of death. Afterward she would lie in her bed and all would come to her to thank her and beg her pardon, and she would smilingly forgive them.

She pricked up her ears. Men were talking. Their voices were low, but the night was still and she could hear clearly.

"Most of them are for it," said someone, who must be Kettler by his voice. "We've had enough of the elders. We're sick of their knowing talk. Who wants to starve when there's an easy way to help ourselves?"

"So you want to make a kind of revolution," someone said, and yawned.

"It's a devilish business," a third growled.

"How do you mean, a devilish business? And revolution? For my part the elders can keep on running things. But I don't want to go hungry because four hundred years ago it wasn't customary to borrow money. Why should we be ruined when we can get money just by signing our names to a scrap of paper?"

"Where your name is your head lies," said the one who had yawned.

"That's true. A farmer who pays interest is like a horse in the circus. He runs around in a circle all day long and never gets anywhere." This was someone who had not spoken before. When he finished, he laughed and spat loudly.

"So you don't want to?" Kettler asked.

"I want to sleep on it," someone murmured. The others said nothing.

"To-morrow may be too late," Kettler urged. "We want to decide to-night. Before dawn we'll awaken the elders and tell them what we want."

"I don't like decisions that are made in the dead of night," someone said. Another added, "The apple with the wormhole is eaten first of all."

The men rose and separated.

Lydia got up. Carefully, she climbed down to the road. She did not know what to do, but it seemed to her that God had placed in her hands the fate of the village. She could go home and tell her father what had happened, but that would not help, and nobody would find out that it had been she who warned the village. "It was your duty," her father would say, "and because it was your duty it is nothing special and not worth mentioning." She must do something that would call attention to herself. She must execute the daydream that was always with her, prove that she belonged to them—all of them, who now sat in their houses laughing and talking and knowing nothing of her loneliness.

She walked back to the village along the side of the road, where the ground was soft and powdery and her footsteps made no sound.

Lydia knocked on the Kettlers' door, waited for an answer, and when none was given, entered. The room was dark. It smelled of coal and faintly of smoke. Someone was busy in the kitchen; through the cracks in the door she could see a shadow scurrying back and forth. The glowing eyes of a cat regarded her from a corner, and somewhere in the room a clock ticked.

"Hello," Lydia called. The movement in the kitchen stopped.

"Is someone there?" a voice asked from behind the door.

"Yes, Lydia Miller."

"Just a minute."

Steps approached and the door opened.

Kettler's mother stood in the doorway. She was a small woman with smooth brown hair, a gaunt face and a protruding chin. In her hand she held a candle, and her head was tilted to see over the light of the candle. She had the melancholy eyes and narrow lips of the Mennonite women, and her skin was tanned and wrinkled.

"Come in and close the door," she said.

Lydia closed the door behind her and went around the table into the kitchen behind Kettler's mother.

The kitchen was a small room with a tiny window. It was hot and filled with smoke, because Mrs. Kettler was baking bread.

"I don't get to it all day long," she said, gesturing toward the small Dutch oven that stood in front of the stove, surrounded above and below by flames. It was an ancient affair; no more than an iron pot on four legs, with a tightly fitting lid. The dough was placed in the inner pot, coals ranged on the earthen floor underneath and heaped on the lid. Within, the bread rose and a firm crust formed. It was slow, but it made the bread light and good and many preferred it to bread baked in an oven.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Kettler asked.

"Where is your eldest?" Lydia asked.

The woman shrugged. "How do I know?" she said. "Out somewhere. What do you want of him?"

"I have to talk to him."

"Can't you say it to me?"

She poked at the glowing wood coals as she would stir a stew.

"No."

"So it's a secret."

Lydia shrugged and went to the window, so that her back was to the woman.

"I don't suppose you're making up another one of those Parker stories about him?" Mrs. Kettler asked in a low, malicious voice.

Lydia's heart jumped. Firmly, she turned to face the woman, who was still squatting before the Dutch oven, her face tight and deep folds running obliquely from the corners of her mouth.

"Why do you give me such a look?" she asked Lydia. "It was a lie, wasn't it? Or do you consider your adventure the holy truth?" She laughed. "Maybe you wouldn't have minded if it had been, eh?"

With an iron shovel she took more coals from the stove and poured them upon the lid. "I can imagine how you feel," she went on. "You're getting old and you don't have everything you want and nobody wants any part of you and you go around with the air of an abandoned cripple. So you talk things into yourself . . ."

"Be quiet," Lydia said.

"You say that to me? In my own house. I like that." She threw down the shovel and stood up, arms akimbo. "You filthy slut!" she screamed. "Get out of here, this minute. You lying slattern. Who's at fault for all the trouble we're having? Why is God punishing this community? Who was a whore in Topeka and who bore false witness in Gnadenau? Who is to blame that our children are hungry and our cattle dying? You hag, you, you ought to ride on a broom and come down through the chimney."

Lydia had stood numbed, not even blinking, her head held rigid against the wall. Her eyes were watering from the acrid smoke and her waist was hot from the glow of the little oven. She ran her hands along her hips, as though to brush away the numbness in her body. Then she wiped her eyes.

"I am not crying, Sister Kettler," she said. "The smoke is harsh."

She took a few steps toward the door, walking slowly and rather unsteadily. The woman watched her; she suddenly felt anxious for the girl. She had let herself go; she should have taken care. But her sick husband and the children and all their troubles had been too much for her; it was more than you could endure in silence. No wonder you forgot yourself sometimes and spoke your mind to the person who probably bore half the blame for it all. You had a right to do that; you didn't have to make excuses, in spite of the girl's having such a queer look on her face.

Lydia paused at the door. She did not turn, but she spoke loudly so that the woman could understand without difficulty.

"You don't have to be afraid, sister," she said. "God will save us. You must not worry yourself to death, sister. You mustn't think the devil is among us because we have locusts, and you mustn't think I'm a slut. I'm ugly and stupid and I don't know myself why I said that about Parker. But I'm not bad, if only you'll believe me. It's hard when one is always alone. Perhaps you don't understand me because I've forgotten how to talk to others. I'm not complaining about that; I'm just telling you so that you'll know why I'm speaking so clumsily and why I can't really tell you how terribly sorry I am about all that's happening. It sounds silly because I've never said it before, but it's so, sister." She paused. Then she said something that sounded like, "If only I could

come to all of you." But her voice was so low that Mrs. Kettler was not sure she had understood aright.

Then Lydia went out.

When Kettler came home toward morning, his mother was waiting up for him.

"Where have you been running around?" she asked.

He looked at her in astonishment. "Why, you know, mother," he stammered.

"None of that, none of that," the woman shouted in a sudden access of rage. "I don't know anything. All I know is that you go running around in the dead of night, and there's something wrong with things that fear the light of day."

"But I explained it to you."

"You did and you didn't. I have no time to think things over in the daytime; but when I'm alone at night baking bread in my oven I have all sorts of ideas. Isn't this a kind of revolution you're trying to make?"

"Yes."

"So, a revolution."

She got up from her oven and went to her son, who stood almost two heads taller than she.

"You blockhead, you worthless fool," she said. "You dumb ox. Do you really think Mennonites will listen to the likes of you? Do you think that laws will lose their force because you run around and stir up the people, make them dissatisfied and promise them money?" She began to laugh almost hysterically. "God in heaven, I'd almost forgotten what it is to laugh," she moaned, wiping her gaunt face. "I needed to bring up a son to find something funny again." Abruptly she stopped laughing.

"How many accomplices have you found?" she asked.

"Most of them want to sleep on it, mother."

"And how many do not want to sleep on it?"

Kettler did not answer. He stood for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and walked past his mother to the door of the bedroom.

"I asked you something, son," she called to him.

As though he had not heard, he pressed the latch down. Then he turned.

"One," he whispered, and disappeared through the door.

When he awoke at night Parker did not know how long he had slept. He listened. There were people in the yard. He had heard their footsteps and voices in his sleep; the sounds had glided into his dream and become distant and muted, like an echo.

The sounds were still unclear when he woke; but he knew the people could not be far from the house. They must be standing about where the

vegetable garden had formerly been. He could distinguish no words. Between sentences they made long pauses, and now and then a very low voice spoke, that of a woman or a child.

Someone stumbled across the yard, stopped at the well and pumped water. Through the window Parker saw the faint glow of a lantern. After a while the light vanished and footsteps shuffled away.

Then he heard nothing but Patricia's breathing. She lay so close to him that he could not move without disturbing her. She was warm, and her skin was slightly moist; her belly pressed against his when she drew breath. Her hair was touching his lips, and he smelled the odour of fire that had become mingled with her hair.

It was this that reminded him that the barn had burned down and that the cow was tied out in the open, where any passer-by could steal her.

"Patricia," he said, putting his hand on her head.

"Huh?"

"There's someone in the yard."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Someone pumped water and several people were talking."

"And?"

"We don't have the cow in the barn."

Patricia sat up in bed.

"The cow?" she asked.

"You remember. We don't have a barn now."

Patricia rubbed her eyes and turned her head toward to window.

"Oh, yes," she said softly. "I didn't know what you meant at first."

She swung around so that she was sitting on the edge of the bed, and Parker clambered past her. He slipped into his trousers and picked up his revolver. Barefoot, he left the room and went to the front door. It was open, as it was every night.

As he reached the threshold, he heard someone whispering. He had not been able to hear it in the room, but here it was quite distinct. A wagon was outlined against the dim light of the sky, and the horses, which were standing together, were like a huge mass, a boulder. The horses were tethered, as if for the night. They were not yet asleep, and the iron rings and buckles of their harness tinkled softly when they stamped their feet.

Patricia appeared at his side. She had come so silently that he started at her touch. She thrust her hand into his and stood beside him, staring into the night.

"Whoever they are, they seem peaceable and harmless," she whispered.

"I'm going to look to the cow. Just as well to be safe."

They walked across the yard. Both were barefoot, and they knew

every step of the way, but nevertheless they made so much noise that someone near the wagon noticed them.

"Hey," he called.

Parker stood still. "Hello, there," he replied.

"Is this your place?"

"Yes."

"We came on account of the fire. We thought you might need help."

"Thank you. We can get on alone."

Someone else came out of the darkness. Parker could not see him, because he carried no lantern, but his shadow scampered across the canvas of the wagon; then the shadow vanished and footsteps came across the yard.

"Where are you?" a voice asked.

"Here," Parker replied.

"It's so dark," the man murmured. He walked on, and after a while stood before them.

They could see him only as a tall, thin shadow. "My name is Jeremiah Kentrup," he said. His voice was friendly, and the way he spoke gave the impression that he wanted to add, You know about me, of course.

"I am Albert Parker and this is my wife, Patricia Parker," Albert said. He did not move to shake hands with the stranger, and he kept his gun pointed at the man.

"God bless you," Jeremiah said.

"Proud to meet you," Albert murmured. "Very proud to meet you."

Patricia crossed herself. "Praise be to Jesus Christ," she stammered.

"In eternity, Amen," Jeremiah replied.

Parker was at a loss for words. He looked around. By now his eyes were accustomed to the darkness, or else it was lighter because the moon was on the point of rising. Anyway, he could see the cow standing near the burned barn, where he had tied her that evening. The ground was cool underfoot and he wanted to go back to bed. He cleared his throat. "There's no way to help us very much," he said. "Thank you anyway for your kind offer. If there's anything we can do for you . . ."

He tried to pocket the revolver unobserved.

"Wouldn't you like to come into the house?" Patricia asked.

"Not to-night. To-morrow, perhaps, if we may."

"We will be glad to have you."

The Parkers left the man and went back to the house; Jeremiah returned to the wagon.

"What do you think they want?" Albert whispered when he lay beside Patricia under the covers once more.

"I don't know."

"He talks like a preacher."

"Yes, but different."

"How different?"

"I don't really know. I wonder what he looks like."

"He has a beard. And I think he's hunchbacked. I don't like hunchbacks. I think he's one of the Maxwell kind. He smelled carrion around here and came on wings. He'll be happy when he hears that we've lost our oxen and our horse and the barn. He'll think we need money. His line is religious. Won't you take a few pennies of my savings, brother? I'll be glad to give it to you for the love of Christ and for two per cent. a month."

Patricia lay looking up at the ceiling, which had large rifts across it. She could see the stars and smell the fragrance of the night. The moon rose and the window frame was lighted on one side of the room. The cross between the panes was silvered on the edges.

"No," Patricia said suddenly.

Albert started up because he had been almost asleep. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Patricia said. "Nothing. Go back to sleep."

When Parker went to the well to wash, the men from the wagon were already up. They had made a fire and hung a kettle over it.

"Good morning," Albert called to them.

The two men at the fire turned. One of them did have a beard, but Albert could not see whether he was hunchbacked. The other had a broad face and blond hair; he must be a big, strong man.

"Good morning, Mr. Parker," the big man said. He spoke to the other man and then came toward Albert.

"My name is Johnny Brown," he said, holding out his hand to Parker.

"Mine's Albert Parker. Proud to meet you."

They shook hands.

"Bad luck you've had here," Johnny said.

Parker took off his shirt and stooped under the pump.

"Excuse me," he said. "I must get ready to work." He let the ice-cold water run over his body, and talked to the man while he washed. "Yes," he said, "damned hard luck. Specially when it happens to you the first year. You never dream that sort of thing's coming, and then it happens. . . . Why have you come here?"

"That's a long story. Me, I'm looking around for land. I want to raise cattle. Seems like a good business to me. I used to prospect for gold . . ."

"Gold?" Parker interrupted him. "Where?"

"Lemhi County. That was the last place. I made my find there."

Parker laughed. "Then I might have met you in Lemhi County."

"How come?"

"If I hadn't got cholera and married and bought this farm here, I would have gone on to Lemhi County. I was in Alma at the time."

"Not a bad place, Alma," Johnny said.

Parker dried his neck and hair. "No, not bad," he said. "But I had enough of it after the cholera broke out. Nobody had his heart in the work after that. It's a hell of a business to dig for gold and be thinkin' you probably won't get anything out of it because you'll croak from cholera. But it was a nice life."

"So, Alma," Johnny said. "You didn't happen to know a fellow by the name of Ginzburger?"

"Did I know Ginzburger?" Again Albert laughed. "He saved my life. He and my wife. They sat beside me and made compresses for me and cared for me like a baby until I pulled out of it. You ought to ask my wife about Ginzburger." He put on his shirt.

"Does your wife know him too?"

"I'll say she does."

He paused for a moment. "My wife's name is Patricia," he said, looking sharply at Johnny. He breathed easier when the stranger showed no sign of recognition.

"Mine's named Agnes," Johnny said. "She was a schoolmarm in Cheyenne before she married me. She's over there in the wagon. She's sick, has some kind of fever. But I think she's getting better."

"And the other man?" Parker asked. "Is he a minister?"

"Not exactly a minister. More of a preacher. He thinks you people here are waiting for him. For my part, I don't think he's all there. He thinks God Himself speaks to him and sends him trotting around the world."

Albert had finished dressing. "I must go now," he said. "We'd be very glad if you'd come to the house later."

"I'll tell Agnes. She'll be very happy."

Albert awakened Patricia. While he kindled a fire in the stove he told her what had happened. After the fire was burning well he carried the damp bedclothes out of the house and spread them on the ground. With his knife he slit open the stitches of the pillows and the mattress and took out the horsehair. The sun was not up yet, but when it rose it would dry them and they would not mould. The linen he hung on the clothes-line, and then he went to attend to the cow.

She had large burns on her hindquarters. They were patches which she licked now and then with her plump red tongue. Her bag was slack, but still he must milk her. She gave scarcely any milk. Then he untied her and let her wander. She would have to find her own fodder. He had nothing for her, and no time to hunt for prairie grass. She would get on; there was still a good deal of untouched green fodder, and she had all day to fill her belly.

As he was returning to the house he met Jeremiah.

"Nice day," the preacher said.

"It would be if everything hadn't gone to the devil here."

"Nothing goes to the devil but what one gives to him, brother."

"My oxen have gone to the devil, and my horse and my fields and my barn. I think that's enough."

He turned and walked on. He must clean out what was left of the barn. Then he must build an emergency shed where he could put the cow when it rained. He must look to the cornfield. And to the potatoes. And he must fix the roof of the house and bury the horse. Patricia could help with the barn, and perhaps this fellow, Brown, would lend him the team so that he could drag the horse out.

When he came into the kitchen, Patricia was sitting at the table with her head pillowed in her arms.

"Patricia," he said.

She did not move. He lifted her head. She was pale and her lips were parted. Her eyes were transfixed, and she seemed to have stopped breathing.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. He unbuttoned her blouse and felt her heart. Her skin was smooth and warm and her heart was beating soundly.

He fetched a pitcher of water and looked around for a rag to dampen. Seeing nothing, he sprinkled the water directly on Patricia's head.

She started and awoke. "Albert," she whispered.

"Yes."

She took his hand. "I'm so glad you're here," she said. She rubbed her sleeve over her face. "I was so frightened all of a sudden. I wanted to call, but I couldn't. Something seemed to be crushing me to death. I thought, It's starting: I'm going to have the baby. Now it's all over, I thought, and we won't even have a child. It wouldn't be born alive at five months. It would be too little, wouldn't be able to breathe; it wouldn't know how to live. We'll bury it beside the oxen, I thought . . ."

"Are you all right now?" Parker asked.

"Oh, yes. It was nothing. I just had a dizzy spell." She paused. "I don't think I'm a good farmer, Albert. I can't really help you, with all these spells I keep having."

"There isn't much to do. I can take care of everything alone."

He looked down at his hands, which were resting in his lap. They were large, square hands, with calluses everywhere and on all the fingers. Good hands for working. They could chop wood and dig gold and guide the plough, build roads and carry sacks of grain. Hands that were strong enough to get the little food they needed and a roof over their heads and a cradle for the baby. Good hands that only needed to be used properly. Properly meant using them sensibly, using your head to guide them.

"Look here," he said. "I don't know whether this is the right moment to talk to you about this, but maybe it is. You know I'm not afraid of any

kind of work, Silverheel, and you know I'm strong and don't have a habit of eating my words and throwing everything up. But when a man has reached the end and doesn't see it and gets it into his head that he must stick it through, then he's plumb crazy. Everyone has only one life, and when it's over it's over. I don't say I don't want to go on or can't do it. But I think it's crazy for me to rebuild the barn and bury the horse and trample locusts. I think I ought to do something better than that. We ought to sell the whole mess. We can just drop everything, go to the city and start something new. After a while we'll forget what has been. We'll just give it up, the way I used to give up an empty claim. You shrugged your shoulders and cursed and moved on when there just wasn't any more gold. Why should a farm be any different than a claim? Why should you defend a farm tooth and claw? After all, it's no more than a patch of land. A god-damned unlucky patch of land, God knows."

Patricia had laid her hand on his, but she had not interrupted him. A man had to talk when he had to. It wasn't good to shut the words up in his throat. You had to listen and wait till he finished; then you had to consider and think about them and not just answer right off. After all, she'd known Albert was getting out of hand. She knew him. Things had become a thousand times worse since the first time he had talked like this. Things were so bad now that sometimes she herself thought it was the end. But when she did think that, she ceased thinking, closed her eyes, set her teeth and shook her head.

"It's all my fault," she said softly. "If I weren't such a 'weakling and always getting sick, everything would have been different: I would so have liked to be a farmer, Albert. It would have meant a lot to a woman like me."

She looked at him with calm, smiling eyes.

"If it isn't to be, Albert, that's all there is to it," she continued. "If we must live in the city because we can't go on here, then we'll pack the few things we own, sell the rest and begin a new life. We should have waited with the baby, Albert. We shouldn't have thought we were strong enough for three when we aren't even strong enough for two."

A hen wandered in through the open door and cackled in amazement. A fly settled on the windowpane outside, and through the door came the sound of the strangers talking.

Parker stood up.

"I'll get to work on the barn," he said, and went out.

It was already warm in the yard. The linen on the clothes-line was dry; the horsehair covers were only slightly damp.

"Patricia," Albert called.

"Yes."

"Maybe you can sew the bedding afterwards. When you feel better."

"Yes, Albert."

She came to the door, still pale and a little unsteady on her feet. "And hold the ladder when I fix the roof."

He knew she was standing in the doorway, but he did not look at her.

As he walked away, he called back. "In case someone comes and wants to buy this farm—the gun is in the drawer."

As he crossed the yard he saw the cow in the distance, moving slowly through the fields; the wind carried the sound of the bell he had placed around her neck.

He began cleaning what was left of the barn. Over the horse he spread a blanket so that he would not have to see it constantly. Then he sorted out all the beams and planks that were still usable. There was not much, but enough to build a shelter for a single cow. He would ram four posts into the ground, build a roof over them, and knock together as much of a wall as was possible with the wood he had. The gaps would be the windows, and when it grew cold he would stuff them with rags.

"May I help you?" Jeremiah asked, appearing suddenly at his side.

"If you like. But it's dirty work. And I have no money, not even for a church."

"I know," Jeremiah said, smiling. "Who has money when there are locusts in the land?"

They set to work without further conversation. Almost all the boards near the ground were still good, and it was not necessary to make the new barn as small as Parker had feared. They loosened the nails with the pinch bar and drew them out with a pair of pliers or the end of the hammer. Some broke because they were thoroughly rusted, but many of them could still be used. The men gathered them carefully and placed them in a heap. They would have to be hammered straight, but they were good to have. The unburned parts of the boards could be sawed off and used. Perhaps there was even enough wood for a wooden roof. Then there would be no need of cutting, drying and bundling prairie grass, and the work would go easier and faster.

Parker kept glancing at the stranger. He'd be damned if this man was a preacher. He was a farmer or a blacksmith. He knew how to use a hammer and a saw, and how to pull nails out of a wall. He carried a hundred-pound beam on his shoulders as though he had done it every day in his life.

At noon they knocked off. Jeremiah returned to the wagon and Albert went to the house. The bedding had been removed from the yard, and Patricia had cooked a nourishing soup and baked fresh bread. She ladled two platefuls from the pot and cut slabs of bread for them. The bread was still warm and fragrant, and its crust was hard, the way Albert liked it.

"A queer kind of preacher that," he said while they were eating. "He handles an axe and a hammer as well as any farmer. And hardly ever talks about God."

"The other man came over here," Patricia said.

"To see you?"

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

Patricia averted her eyes. "He asked me whether the farm was for sale."

Parker whistled sharply.

"I said no."

"And?"

"He said he wanted to seed this place to grass and raise cattle. On a big scale; no small stuff like our place. But several small places together. We and our neighbours and our neighbours' neighbours. And everything big and modern and efficient."

"And?"

"I think that's all."

They ate in silence for a while.

"Do you know him?" Parker asked at last.

"Yes."

"Well . . .?"

"I don't think so, Albert."

"And the preacher?"

"No."

Parker got up and fetched a glass of water. After drinking it, he strolled toward the door. "I'm going to tell them to get the hell out of here," he said.

He stood at the threshold, his body darkening the room.

"Albert," Patricia whispered.

"Uh."

"We have enough trouble. You mustn't do anything to make it worse. You mustn't think you have to hate him or fight him because he may have slept with me. You know how it was. It's past now, and has nothing more to do with me."

"Shut up."

"You shouldn't have married me, Albert, if you're going to fly into a rage when someone happens along who might have slept with me. You shouldn't have thought you loved me so much that you could forget all that. If you hurt him, the sheriff will come and take you away and I'll be left here on the farm with my baby and a dead horse in the stall and one cow and a million locusts."

"I won't touch him," Parker said without turning. "I'll just tell him not to waste his time on us. He and the preacher with him. I'll give them an hour to go before I throw them out."

He stepped out into the yard. The sun beat down on his head, and he felt the heat of midday in his eyes.

"Albert."

He paused. "Is there anything else?" he asked.

"I don't think the preacher has anything to do with it."

Parker turned. He was on the point of saying something ugly, but he remained silent because Patricia was looking at him with her finger crooked and held to her lips.

"It moved," she whispered. "Albert, our baby moved for the first time. It kicked me. Really kicked me."

Slowly he went back to her and sat down at her side. He took the jug and poured himself a glass of water. "If we had whisky we could celebrate it," he said. "We ought to celebrate it. Everything else has gone to hell, but our baby has stirred. Well, I'll be damned."

He laughed and drained the glass. "Do you think I can feel it if I put my hand on your belly?" he asked.

"I'm sure of it."

"Do you think it will stir at night too?"

"I don't know."

"Because if it does, I could feel it then."

They remained sitting, looking at the table with its bowls and plates and the jug. It was a strong, heavy table, of a pale wood, covered with crumbs from the bread they had eaten with their soup. It was good to feel the big, square chairs under you, and to set your feet on the firm earthen floor; good to breathe the smell of the wooden walls and of the fire that was still burning in the stove. You had a cow and perhaps you would save some of the corn; and if need be the Mennonites would lend enough to keep you from starving. Why should you think you had lost out? You could afford to be good-natured with the vultures. Poor devils they were, with their wagon and no roof over their heads. And didn't they have a sick woman with them? God, yes, they had a sick woman and you had one who was going to have a baby, and the baby was already stirring.

"Come on," he said, getting up. "We'll pay a visit to our guests. I'd like to get them to lend us their team, so that we can bury the horse."

Leisurely, they walked across the sunlit yard.

"We're having visitors," Johnny said when he saw the Parkers crossing the yard.

He was sitting on a rock in front of the wagon, a small black notebook on his knees, writing figures with a tiny stub of pencil. He had no idea what was the present price of gold, but he imagined it must be around sixteen dollars per ounce. He also had no idea about the price of land in Kansas, but he imagined it could not differ very much from prices in Wyoming.

The worst of it was that he did not know the prices of cattle. They

might have advanced a hundred per cent. or decreased fifty per cent. A yearling might cost eleven dollars or five now. He could no longer simply multiply the weight of his gold by sixteen, subtract the costs of land, wagons, house and horses, and divide the remainder by the average price of cattle to determine how many head he would be able to buy.

He got up and, sighing, put the notebook back in his pocket. It was horrible, how much time he was wasting. The worst of it was that the more he saw of Kansas the less he felt that he belonged here. He didn't want to be a farmer, God save him from that. He didn't want to know any more about the animals he was raising than their weight and their price, and as for the land, all he cared about was the number of acres and the head of cattle it could support. He didn't feel like crawling on his belly and earning his bread in the sweat of his brow. He was not interested in watching fields ripen, or in quavering with fear when the cow calved. He hadn't dug gold and made his find in order to live that kind of life; you didn't have to do that when you were rich. When you had money you didn't have to stick to any one thing. You could do one thing to-day and another to-morrow; if you found you didn't like cattle you could start a lumberyard or go south and trade in cotton.

He walked slowly toward the Parkers. "Good afternoon. Nice of you to pay us a visit."

"Where is the preacher?" Albert asked, without returning the greeting.

"I don't know. I'm not his keeper."

"Too bad. I would like you both to hear what I have to say."

"And I would like you to speak a little lower. My wife is asleep and she's sick."

Parker's temper rose. This was his land, and he would shout if he pleased. If they didn't like it, they could lump it.

Patricia put her hand on Albert's arm. "My husband can say what he has to say softly," she said. "When you have right on your side, you don't have to shout."

"That's true," Albert said. He laughed and put his hands in his pockets, but he squared himself before Johnny. "When you have right on your side, you don't have to shout." He spoke quietly and a little smugly, but Patricia felt how dangerously close he was to breaking out, and she put her arm through his so that he would remember that she was beside him, with their baby which had stirred.

"Look here, Mr. Brown, or whatever your name is," Parker went on. "This land for about a thousand yards on either side of the road is mine. It's good, healthy soil and it cost me eight dollars cash an acre. I've cultivated only a part of it. It extends down to the brook, and the hill alone probably isn't worth much. But I wouldn't sell even the hill. This land is not for sale, Mr. Brown; it can't be had for any price, not from

me and not from my wife. If you still want to stay here as a visitor, I have no objection." He turned on his heel and was about to walk off.

From beneath the roof of the wagon someone began to cough horribly. It sounded so dreadful that Patricia stood stock-still, and because she had her arm through Albert's, he, too, stood and waited. They did not turn. They held their heads lowered and listened, not daring to breathe. The cougher seemed to be choking.

Patricia turned. Brown was still standing with eyes closed and his lower lip clenched between his teeth. He was ghastly pale, and he seemed smaller, as though his very joints had yielded.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Patricia murmured.

Brown started. "Please go," he said mutedly. "We don't need any help."

Patricia did not stir. One could not go away when another human being was dying. A woman was dying in there, and these men were standing out here and waiting until it was over. The man must be mad, not trying to help her. You didn't let an animal die like that; simply kick off in a covered wagon without a glass of water or a consoling hand and a few words.

She began running the few yards toward the wagon. Small bunches of grass grew near the wagon, with clusters of locusts hanging to them. There was the man; he had not moved. He had not noticed that she was running. She stepped on his shadow, but still he did not move. He seemed struck numb. Small rocks lay among the bunches of grass, and over the rocks lay gnawed, withered blades of grass. There was the shaft, light grey with an iron cap up front. She stepped on it, grasped the footrest and drew herself up. She swung her knees on it. The edge cut into her knees. She had to draw her skirt down before she could stand up.

"Hey there," a voice called. Let him call. She was on the front seat now. She clambered over the back of the seat.

It was dark in the wagon. The woman's coughing had become a low, ghastly rattling. So low that it could not be heard outside. But Patricia heard it clearly. It was worse than the cough, much worse.

The man was coming behind her. She heard his footsteps. Now he had reached the wagon, but she was already inside; he could not stop her from helping, not now.

Then she saw the blood. It was everywhere, on the pillows, the sheets and on the floor. The sheets had absorbed it; but a small pool had remained, for they had become saturated. The blood gleamed in the light that came from the back of the wagon. It gleamed on the sheets and on the floor.

The woman lay on her side, with eyes closed and her hand clenching a small handkerchief against her mouth. The handkerchief was wet with red blood. It was so pathetically small for all the blood.

Patricia sat down on the edge of the bed and put her hand on the woman's forehead, which was warm and damp. She ought to bathe it. And they ought to fix fresh bedding for her; they couldn't let her lie like this.

"Get out of here," the man whispered; his head had appeared over the back of the front seat. He could not see the woman yet. He did not know what had happened.

Patricia beckoned to him. His face was enraged. Perhaps he would hurt her; she would not be able to defend herself in here. She would scream. Albert was near the wagon.

"Albert," she called softly.

"Yes."

"Stay there, please."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know, but someone is very sick."

Now the man saw the blood. "Oh, my God," he said.

He knelt beside the bed, in the midst of the pool of blood. It was sucked up by his trousers, staining them brown. After a while he would feel it wetting his knees, if he was aware of his own feelings at all.

"Agnes," he said, "Agnes." He bent his face close to hers. "Don't you hear me?" he asked. His chin touched the blood on the sheets and was stained. He pushed his hand underneath Patricia's and felt his wife's face. He felt her nose, her eyes and her forehead, and he felt the warmth and moistness of her skin. Her eyelids quivered and her forehead wrinkled under his hand. She was not dead. Perhaps it wasn't so bad. It might be that the body had expelled the bad blood; Nature had helped herself and done what doctors did when they let blood. That must be it. To recover health, the bad blood must go first; then the good blood would be purified.

"She's very weak," Patricia said.

"Yes, but maybe she'll be better for it."

Patricia looked at the man from the side, wondering whether he was mad. God knows, he didn't have to be a doctor to know. "Yes," she said, "maybe she'll be better for it."

Silence spread through the wagon, the silence of a house where death has entered. Now they could no longer hear the woman's breathing. Outside a horse neighed, and Parker paced back and forth. There was something outside, then—land and sun and a house, soup and warm bread and a bed in the bedroom where you could lie beside your husband. Patricia crossed herself. It was sinful to think of that in the presence of the dying. Holy Virgin of Padua, forgive me my sin and intercede graciously for this dying woman.

"We ought to change the bedding," she whispered.

The man, who was still kneeling beside the bed, looked up.

"Go," he said.

Patricia looked at him in amazement.

"What?" she asked.

"Get out of here."

Slowly Patricia got up. She could not stand erect under the canvas roof.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I don't want a dame like you to touch her."

"Oh."

Stooped, she walked the length of the bed to the rear exit. There was a small step on the ground; she stepped down on it. When she touched the ground, the sunlight in her eyes blinded her and made her dizzy, so that she had to sit down. She sat on the lowest board of the little step, drew up her legs and laid her head on her knees. Albert had not heard her. He had heard nothing, and she would tell him only that she had not been able to do anything. The woman was dying and she could not help. Could not. No, that was it, could not.

"Is something wrong, sister?" a voice asked. She looked up and saw the preacher standing in front of her.

She shook her head, seeing the man for the first time. She knew the faces of men; they were easy to classify. Men's faces were something you learned to understand in the saloons. Behind the masks she had always seen them as they were: good, indifferent, bad. She had not troubled much over why they were what they were, but she had seldom been mistaken. The faces determined the price you could ask. In time you came to rely on your reckoning as a horse dealer relies on his eye for horses.

"She's sick in there," Patricia said, wondering why she could make nothing of this preacher's face.

"Sick?"

Patricia nodded. "She's had a hæmorrhage," she whispered. "But her husband thinks it's the bad blood that has been expelled."

"We must find a doctor," he said.

"There is none here."

"Is there a village with a hotel?"

"The next village is Gnadenau. The Mennonites live there. I don't know whether they have a hotel."

Hearing them talking, Parker came toward them from the other side of the wagon.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Patricia stood up and went close to him. She put her arm around his shoulder. She had to, had to feel his nearness; she needed him. Since this man Brown had come she had thought too much of the old days. And it was terribly painful for her to think of them. Could they never be buried completely?

"The woman is dying," she told him.

Jeremiah shook his head. "Why do you say that, sister? If God wills, she will die, and if He does not will it, she will live. But He does not wish us in our mind to go burying anyone before he is dead."

He smiled pleasantly at Patricia and began walking toward the horses.

"We ought to ask him about the team," Patricia said. "If they go, we can't bury the dead horse."

They ran after the preacher and asked him to lend them the team. He gave them an old horse with a tawny mane and a young one; then he went on toward the wagon, leading the other two horses.

"A nice beast," Patricia said, patting the old horse's neck.

"A little like ours," Parker murmured.

"Yes," Patricia said, and tears started to her eyes.

Silently they went to the barn, and with the two living horses they dragged out the body of the dead one. When they reached a spot near the graves of the oxen they halted the horses, unhitched them and brought them back.

"Thank you very much," Parker said to Jeremiah, handing him the reins.

"He's a nice horse, the old one," Patricia said.

Jeremiah tied the younger horse behind the wagon. When he had finished he came back to the Parkers, leading the old horse by the bridle.

"This one is my horse," he said. "He's a good beast. If the shoes were repaired, he could work another few years. He doesn't eat much, and even eating wet grass doesn't give him the colic. He's not very good going uphill any more, but if you give him time he'll manage any hill." He paused and looked down at the ground. Then he cleared his throat and stroked the horse's mane.

"He's not much use to me any more," he said, his voice low and kindly. "I am at the end of my journey. I have no stall for him and no fodder. If you'd like to keep him . . . I think you could use him. He isn't worth much—he only cost a few dollars . . ." Jeremiah moved his hand forward and gave the reins to Patricia.

Patricia's fingers closed around them. "Dear St. Francis of Assisi!" she exclaimed, shaking her head.

Johnny knelt beside his wife. She had awakened; her eyes were open and she smiled now and then, but she said nothing. The wagon rocked, the wheels crunched and the horses' hoofs stamped heavily over the ground. The sun entered through the rear of the wagon, its rays swaying back and forth inside; the wind blew in through the front, carrying with it a leaf or a butterfly. The horse that Jeremiah had tied in the rear stumbled through the wheel ruts with his hind legs, while his forelegs pranced upon the middle of the road.

The men had not changed the sheet. The blood had become brown and hard, and when Agnes woke they had covered the spot with clean linen and put a fresh pillowcase over the pillow. Johnny had thrown away the handkerchief Agnes held clenched in her hand. When it fell into the wheel ruts, it looked like a withered leaf. The horse had trampled on it and ground it into the earth.

Jeremiah let the horses walk as they would. There was no hurry. They would arrive in Gnadenau long before nightfall, and that was all they wanted. He sat bowed forward in the seat, observing the land, which had become bare and mournful under the jaws of the locusts. It had become mangy land, like the hide of a diseased dog; eaten out like the body of a leper. Only stalks and branches had remained, and here and there the bark was stripped from trees.

And although there was daily less to eat, the locusts had not flown on. Jeremiah had examined them carefully that morning. He had held them between his fingers and tested the strength in their legs; he had smelled the odour of the yellow fluid that dripped from their mouths. He had observed their faces, which were unchanged, and their bodies, which seemed fatter and heavy in the abdomen. It was easy to see that they were well fed; the harvests of Kansas had pleased them. But at the same time they had become lazier. They were clumsier and more repulsive, and when one trampled them the crushed remains were greasier and more horrid than they had been. A change had taken place in them; a change that perhaps had occurred because they had found the country the Lord had destined for them; now they no longer needed to fly and migrate, to struggle for their daily bread. Life had become for them a matter of crawling and eating what virtually grew into their mouths. They went from the timothy grass to the corn, from the corn to the wheat, from the wheat to the peas, and it must have seemed to them that they had found the land of milk and honey.

Jeremiah was holding the reins so loosely that now and then the horses stopped to sniff the ground. Then Jeremiah recalled them to their task. But most of the time he sat still, studying the road that flowed by beneath him, and the crows and thrushes, which had grown plump from feeding on locusts. He saw the dust from the horses' hoofs settling on the stems of the nettles, the broom and the blackberries along the road, and on the sluggish clusters of locusts. Had he come too late? Had they already drained the last blood out of this earth? Was there nothing for the people to do but to strike their tents and leave this land, this land that the Lord may have intended as an asylum for locusts and not for men? Jeremiah smiled. Would the Lord have spoken to him if this was so? Would the Eternal have sent him the dream, and would God's wind have thrown the fire upon the roof of the Parkers' barn, if it was not meant as a sign to him?

He heard Johnny speaking softly with Agnes. He could not understand what they were saying, but after a while Johnny touched his shoulder.

"Stop at the next house," he said. "She's cold. She must have a hot-water bottle."

Jeremiah nodded. "How is she?"

"Tired. She says she feels nothing; that she seems weightless. But her hands are blue with cold. I think she lost a great deal of blood. For such a little woman, I mean."

"Yes, it was a great deal."

"Do you think I might give her some whisky?"

"If she'd like it."

"I don't think she's ever had any. Schoolteachers don't drink whisky."

He retired again to the inside of the wagon. Agnes seemed to be asleep. Her face was thin, and almost hidden in shadow. She had raised her eyebrows, as though she were amazed at something. Her mouth was small and compressed, and her fingers were quivering. She heard Johnny sit down beside her. It was so easy to be sick when you had no pain. You rode through the land in a bed, you rode like a queen through the land. You had your attendants around you, the men and the horses, and the sun caressed you. It was good to be sick and to lie and to have others care for your needs; to have pillows under your head and the floor of a wagon under the pillows, and the earth under the wagon. You swayed along in the air, and in front of you sat a gentleman with a red beard. A stupid man. Are you not a stupid man, Jeremiah, you who understand men and God so well and know nothing of Agnes Andersen? Are you not a poor, unfortunate man, who in your innocence do not see that someone is dying for you?

Jeremiah stopped the horses. He drew the reins back against his body and called, "Whoa."

"God bless you," he said to Betty Maxwell and Clara, who stood at the well washing clothes.

"Hello," Betty replied, rubbing her forearm over her sweaty face.

"Can we get some hot water from you? We have a sick woman in the wagon."

Clara wrung out one of Heinrich's shirts. She twisted it until it stopped dripping, and threw it damp into a basket. Then she turned to Heinrich, who sat on the threshold with the boy in his arms.

"Bring hot water, Heinrich," she said.

The man stood up. He took the baby, who was wrapped in a heavy blanket, into the house with him.

"What's the matter with her?" Betty asked.

"She has the fever," Jeremiah replied.

"Everything around here seems to be sick and rotted and infested.

When I arrived here the baby was nearly dead. I helped him recover. I know something about sickness. If you like, I'll take a look at your wife."

"She isn't my wife."

"She's my wife," Johnny said, looking at Jeremiah over his shoulder. "My name is Johnny Brown. I'd appreciate it if you'd come into the wagon."

"Proud to meet you," Betty said, drying her hands on her apron. "I'm Betty Maxwell and this is Clara Bieber." She approached them. "If you think she wouldn't mind, I'd be glad to look at her."

"I don't think so," Johnny said. "I doubt she'll even notice it. She's always tired and sleeps most of the time. She has lost a great deal of bad blood several hours ago. It's weakened her terribly."

Jeremiah got down and the woman clambered on to the wagon and vanished inside with Johnny. The preacher went to Clara, who had begun washing again.

"My name is Jeremiah Kentrup," he said.

"We are the Biebers," Clara said, pausing for a moment.

"You have a nice farm here."

Clara bent her head and observed her red hands, holding a dark woollen stocking under the water. She began rubbing against the weave. Her shoulders were drawn up and her arms stretched forward, and as she worked the water splashed and foamed into thick bubbles.

"It was a nice farm once," she said. "A few days ago, before all this began. But since then the devil has couched himself on our roof and plays cat and mouse with us."

"How can the devil enter if one does not open the door to him?" Jeremiah asked. And again the woman paused in her work and looked at him.

"Are you a parson?" she asked after a while. Jeremiah could not tell whether she spoke seriously or mockingly.

"No," he replied smilingly.

"Because you talk so devoutly."

She bent her head again, thinking of Heinrich and his eternal prayers. All his praying was destroying his backbone, that's what it was doing. Yes, that was it.

"One does not have to be a parson to believe in God," Jeremiah said.

For a few seconds Clara commanded herself. But then she could no longer hold back her anger; her face flushed and her eyes filled with tears.

"I have a husband who prays from morning to night, mister," she said. Her voice was fierce, but very low. "He used to be a farmer, my husband. He was always the kind to brood and see things on the black side, but he did his work like any other farmer. He tended the fields and

the stock and I took care of the house and the garden and the baby. Things went as they went, and we always had bread and milk and a little money over for a bit of cloth. Then the locusts came. Everybody knows locusts are a disaster and that our Lord created them in anger and that they are to rot away while still alive. Everyone knows they're a scourge that the Heavenly Father lashes over the righteous and the unrighteous. But not everyone knows they carry a pestilence that eats away at the brain and sucks the marrow out of the bones, so that there's nothing left of a man but a mouth to babble prayers." She laughed. With the back of her wrist she brushed the hair from her forehead and again bent over her washtub.

"That's why pious talk isn't prized on this farm, Mr. Kentrup," she said. She fished the woollen stockings out of the suds and began rubbing them again.

Betty Maxwell came toward them from the wagon.

"Are you related to the sick woman?" she asked the preacher.

"No."

"Do you know how she really is?"

"She's very sick."

"She's dying."

"If God wills."

"And her husband doesn't realize it."

"He will when the time comes."

"When the time comes," Betty repeated scornfully, and spat. Jeremiah said nothing. After a while he put his hand on Clara's shoulder. At the touch she stopped her work. She stood still, feeling the warmth of his fingers through her dress.

Then Jeremiah crossed the yard to the house. When he vanished inside, the two women set to work again. Now and then they listened for his voice, each of them when the other would not notice.

When Jeremiah entered the room, Maxwell was sitting in front of the stove and Heinrich was standing near it, waiting for the water to heat.

"Praise be to Jesus Christ," Jeremiah said.

"In eternity, Amen," Bieber replied, turning his face to the preacher.

They named their names, and each said he was honoured to meet the other, and then they stood listening to the fire and to the singing of the kettle.

"What are you doing to fight the locusts, brother?" Jeremiah asked at last.

"Doing? What is to be done?"

"You can cut down the infested fields, and when the stalks are dry you can set fire to them. You can harvest the unripe corn and dry the ears in the sun; then it can be fed to the animals in the winter. You can go out into the prairie and mow the wild grass to fill your haymow. For God has

let it grow for you, Heinrich Bieber, not for it to rot in the rain and snow while your animals suffer hunger."

"My animals don't eat prairie grass, mister," Bieber retorted. "Not my animals."

"Your animals will eat prairie grass as they would oats or clover. They will keep alive on reeds and swamp grasses, if God wills. Your animals will eat sawdust and pulverized bark; it will fill their bellies, that they may give you milk and draw your plough in the spring. They will be weak and their bones will show through the hide, but they will be alive and not under the ground—if you do not let them starve. Do you think God wishes His creatures to starve?"

"You talk like a fool," said the little man at the stove. "Tend to your soul-saving and let the farmer tend to his cows and oxen. Mr. Bieber knows what he has to do. He's had a bad year; what does any farmer do when he's had a bad year? He borrows money, because he can pay it back next year. That's simple as two and two. The prairie grass days are over, Mr. Preacher."

Jeremiah poked his finger into the water. Because Bieber had taken an earthen pot it was not yet hot enough. The baby lay on the bed staring wide-eyed at the men. When he saw that the men were silent, he began playing with his fingers and laughing softly to himself.

"I think a sack of sawdust would suit a cow better than a dollar's loan would a farmer," Jeremiah said suddenly. "I don't think any man is strong enough to feed himself and wife and child, and to stuff the belly of the usurer at the same time."

Maxwell opened the door of the firebox and spat into the coals.

"Say," he asked, "what do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I said," Jeremiah replied.

"You'd better guard your tongue," Maxwell growled.

Bieber stood between the two men, saying nothing. He was listening to the child's chatter behind him and the lowing of the animals in the barn. He had not prayed much to-day. He had sat for a long time in the sun, and for a while he had walked over a field and trampled a few locusts now and then. It was little enough he had done in a long day, when there were better things to do.

"I think the water is hot," Jeremiah said in his friendly voice.

"Yes," Bieber agreed, taking the pot from the stove.

"No offence meant, brother," Jeremiah said to Maxwell, and followed Heinrich out into the yard.

The women stopped washing when they saw the men coming. They stood stooped over the tubs with their hands in the water and their eyes following Jeremiah. He was smiling; the sunlight was in his face and his beard gleamed. When he noticed that the women were looking, he inclined his head toward them.

The men poured the hot water into an iron warming bottle that was oval and flat, and shaped like a turtle's shell. It had a round opening at the neck, sealed with a ringed plug.

"Took you long enough," Johnny grumbled, and when Jeremiah introduced Heinrich Bieber he said nothing, but went directly into the wagon. What was it to him who this farmer was? What did he care what the preacher said? He had seen the Maxwell woman's face when she looked at Agnes, and it had frightened him. Though she had said nothing, he suddenly knew that it was all up with Agnes. He had not questioned her or said anything; he had merely smiled contortedly. It had not been the bad blood, after all; it had been the real, good, pure blood that a human being needed to live.

He had taken Agnes's hand, and she had nodded and smiled at him as though to say she knew everything.

What did he care about these dirt farmers? What did he care what they were saying or doing out there, those rotters, those unfeeling pigs, standing there in the sun and chattering as though everything in the world was rosy? They might keep their lousy mouths shut. They might have the consideration to let him alone, instead of staring at him and trying to read in his face the emotion he would not show them.

Jeremiah climbed up on the wagon seat.

"I'll be coming back," he said to Bieber, who had been standing beside him. "You have a magnificent piece of land here. We'll drive out together and cut prairie grass, if you like. Sometimes there's a kind of wild oat growing among it. You ought to know it. It's worth its weight in gold. Better than anything else you can feed stock."

Bieber nodded. He glanced over at the women, who had begun washing again; then over their heads at the barn. The door was open and he could see the hind legs of one of the oxen. The animal was smeared with manure; he would have to clean it. The stalls ought to be cleaned of manure and fresh bedding strewn. There was so much to do you didn't know where to begin. And besides all that, the locusts were there. And besides, everything was lost. There was nothing to do but pray.

He nodded again. "I'll be happy if you come again," he said stiffly and awkwardly. He bowed slightly, as men did in the country of his birth.

"Don't pray overmuch," Jeremiah replied softly, and took up the reins.

The horses thrust their weight forward, the tugs tautened and squealed. But the wagon still stood without moving; the wheels had not yet begun to move. It was as quiet in the farmyard as it would be at sunset.

Jeremiah smiled and bent down as far as he could, so that his eyes were close to Heinrich Bieber's eyes. "For thou shalt eat the labour of

thy hands; happy shalt thou be, and it will be well with thee," he whispered.

Then he straightened up and said, "Giddap."

Francis Lacoste and George Hilpert sat before their ragged tent on the outskirts of Gnadenau. They sat on boxes with their bony elbows propped on their knees and their hands clasped like children at school. Their eyes were turned with melancholy longing toward the village. All day long they had been waiting for clients; the sun was already low in the west and the evening wind was playing with the canvas of the tent, and still no one had come. Whenever they saw a puff of dust they had inhaled deeply through their big noses, taken heart, and moved another box between them, so that a guest might have a seat. But no one had come to see them, not even Kettler, whom they had counted a certain catch.

They had considered going into the village themselves, but in the end decided to remain where they were; you didn't run after men who wanted to borrow money, no more than you chased a mouse with the trap in your hand. You had to wait until they came of themselves; without patience you would catch no mice and lend no money at two per cent. a month.

It was a hard business, this moneylending, and sometimes they thought mournfully of the good old days when they had gathered buffalo bones. They had worked hard and stunk, and the stench had never quite left their clothing. But after all, they had dealt only with corpses and skeletons; it was none of their concern how the bones were ground up to make buttons. They had stuffed their sacks and loaded them, and they had received their money; that was all they had to do with it. It was a simple, clean business, and you ran it on simple, clean principles. What they were doing now did not stink, but it was far sadder, and neither of them could think about it without melancholy. There was so terribly much misery in the world, and these farmers were poor devils plagued by locusts—a scourge from heaven. It was cruel to enrich yourself at the expense of the farmers. But what else could you do? Everyone had his load to bear in this world; if they had become usurers, that was the will of the Lord, just as everything else was His will.

They looked up at the noise of Johnny's wagon, which was moving slowly through the valley. In the distance they saw the dust, and after a while the wagon itself appeared around a turn of the road.

"Another one," Lacoste said tonelessly. Hilpert nodded, understanding that he meant another usurer.

"They're all flocking here," Lacoste went on after they had sat in silence for some time. "Each one thinks the more remote the village the easier his business will be, and the thicker the locusts the fatter the

profits." He shook his head and began picking his nose. "And look what's happened," he continued. "Who would have expected it? The damned farmers are getting stubborn. You can't convince them that two times two equals four. They say, land is something more than so many acres and so many square feet. They say, there's something behind it, something you as a moneylender don't understand." He sneezed. With the back of his hand he wiped away the snot that remained hanging under his nose. Again he shook his head. "How can you lend money to them when you don't understand them? How can you talk to a man who speaks another language?"

He fell silent and the two watched the wagon, which was unhurriedly approaching. "There's three horses," Lacoste said. "Maybe it's just the trader." He spoke as though trying to convince and console himself.

Hilpert shrugged. A trader looked different; he had pots and pans hanging to his wagon, and he didn't have a saddle horse hitched behind. A trader was a trader; a blind man could tell that wagon didn't belong to a trader.

When Jeremiah saw the two men sitting beside the road, he stopped the horses.

"Is it far to the village, brother?" he asked.

"This is it," Hilpert said, scarcely moving his lips.

"Is there a hotel?"

"A hotel?"

"We have a sick woman in the wagon who needs a real bed."

Hilpert glanced at Lacoste. "Is there a hotel?" he asked.

Lacoste shook his head. "You'll have to go on," he said. "There are plenty of hotels in Topeka. All you want. Nice place, Topeka—all the comforts in the world. What's the matter with her?"

Jeremiah did not reply because at that moment Agnes called him. He heard her saying his name, faintly but clearly, and when he turned he saw that she had raised herself slightly and fixed upon him her wide, startled eyes. She lifted her finger to her lips to indicate to Jeremiah that he should not disturb Johnny, who was sitting ponderously on the edge of the bed. His body had slumped to one side and his head was resting on his shoulder, while his dangling hands touched the floor of the wagon. He had fallen asleep.

"Don't go on," Agnes whispered. "Don't go into the village. I don't want the hotel. Don't arrive before nightfall, Jeremiah."

"As you will, sister."

They were silent for a while.

"Will it be night soon?" she asked after a while.

Jeremiah shook his head. "No, not for a long time."

She sank back on the pillows. She put her arm under her head and smiled faintly. "That's good," she whispered. "Very good."

Softly, so as not to waken Johnny, Jeremiah got down from the wagon. He went over to the two old men, who rose from their perches when they saw him coming. They introduced themselves, and shook hands with the preacher. Their hands were thin and bony, with yellow skin and purple, stringy veins on the back. Their eyes were melancholy and their voices hoarse, but they spoke with all the friendship they could muster because they had realized instantly that this man with his red beard and his smile could not be a rival moneylender.

Jeremiah smelled the stench of their clothes, but he did not want to offend them and sat down on the third box. They told him of the bones, and the rotten life they had led until one day they found a great charnel house larger than any heap of bones they had ever dreamed of finding.

"Then we decided to quit," Hilpert said. "We knew we couldn't make a bigger find. It was like one of God's miracles, if you believe in miracles." He did not wait for Jeremiah to reply. "Lacoste, I said, Lacoste, this is a sign that we ought to quit. There's a panic in the land and no one has money and the banks are closing."

"Yes, he said that," the other man nodded.

"Lacoste, I said, the locusts have fallen upon the farmers. The farmers have land. We'll lend the farmers the money we've made from this find. We'll help them so that they don't have to sell their cattle; we'll help them get through these evil times. We'll pick out the good, solid farmers, and we'll lend money cheaply, at easy rates; we won't be what people call usurers." He fell silent and stared at the ground.

Lacoste bent forward and spat.

"And do you know what has happened?" he asked.

Jeremiah nodded.

"You know?" Lacoste asked in astonishment, and Hilpert looked up. The two sat waiting for Jeremiah to speak, like two great, black, high-shouldered birds sitting on a fence rail.

"The Lord went before you and warned the farmers. When they lay sleepless at night, He sat down at their bedsides and spoke to them. He said, A man is coming named Hilpert, and another named Lacoste; they will offer you money and ask you to sign terms for it that you will not be able to meet. I, your God, am with you, if you struggle against the locusts and if you drive away Hilpert and Lacoste. Then the farmers fell asleep, thinking that since the Lord was with them all was well. And all was well, and they fought the locusts. They fought them with their hands, and when their hands grew weary with their feet, and when their feet grew weary with their teeth, and when their teeth broke, they rolled their own bodies over the fields. And all the while they thought, God is with us, and because this was so they did not need your money."

Jeremiah smiled at them. They sat still on the boxes, under their big hats, with the wind teasing the yellowish-white strands of their beards.

Their heads were sunk between their shoulders, their crumpled, dirty coats hung almost down to the ground at the sides, and Jeremiah, too, thought of them as squatting scarecrows. They held their eyelids lowered and their hands clasped, and seemed to be waiting for Jeremiah to go on.

Then someone appeared on the road. It was a woman, still far away, and nothing could be seen of her but her light dress and her kerchief. She came from the direction of the village, and would pass the men if she did not turn aside into the fields.

"Someone's coming," Lacoste said, squinting and stroking his beard.

"Yes," Hilpert said, standing up.

"Do you think she's coming to see us?"

Hilpert shrugged. "How do I know? She's a big, strong female, and she's walking very fast."

Lacoste looked at Jeremiah. "We might be having visitors, your reverend," he said. "Of course this land isn't our property, but if you would be so good as to leave us alone . . ."

"Since the farmers have God's help, anyway," Hilpert added without looking at Jeremiah.

Jeremiah nodded. "I'll go," he said quietly and pleasantly. "And don't misunderstand what I said about God's help. He is with you just as He is with the farmers. You are just as close to His heart as they are. His love is immutable and all-embracing, and if you wished you might share in it." He paused for a moment and took a few steps toward the wagon. Then he turned to them again. "You are old," he said, "and although you are old you have not become wise. Your eyes have remained blind and your ears stopped. Your noses have lost the sense of smell, your fingers the sense of touch, and your hearts have become filled with sadness. You live in a world that is not the world of God. Turn about before your hour to die."

He walked slowly to the wagon. When he reached it, Johnny came to the exit.

"Why are we standing still?" he asked.

"Agnes wanted it."

"Agnes?"

"While you were asleep she woke up. She sat up and spoke to me."

Johnny clambered down from the wagon. "Come with me a minute," he said when he reached the ground.

They walked away until they were out of hearing of the wagon. Then Johnny stopped. He grasped Jeremiah's arm.

"Agnes is dying," he said under his breath. "Is it true that Agnes is dying?"

"She is very sick," Jeremiah replied.

"Is it true she's dying?"

For a while Jeremiah said nothing at all. At last he nodded. "It is true, unless God performs a miracle."

Johnny released Jeremiah's arm and took off his hat. He lowered his head; his eyes narrowed and his jaw thrust forward.

"It is your fault," he said slowly.

"What did you say, brother?" Jeremiah asked, not understanding because Johnny's voice was hoarse and anguished.

"You are like a murderer, preacher. You knew that a woman sick to death was making this trip on your account. You knew that on your account she was riding through America in a wagon. You saw her getting sicker and weaker every day, and you closed your eyes and pretended it didn't concern you. *Merde*, you thought, *merde*. What does a human life matter? What does a dying woman mean to your Path? You want to rescue farmers, to save men's souls. You have your mouth full of noble words, and a woman dies in your presence and you don't even say, Let us stop for a while. You don't say, Let us go to a doctor. You don't say, We must put her in a warm bed so that she can rest and recover her health. You simply say, Let us go on, on, every day. Go on, every hour, every minute. Let us go on until she has bled to death. You're the devil, that's what you are. The devil riding through the land in my wagon. Eating my bread and sleeping in my tent; stealing my wife and killing her because you can't have her alive."

Johnny's breath had become a heavy gasp. He stood stooped forward, looking out over the fields, his knees bowed as though he bore a heavy load on his back. He shook his head. "I've forgotten what to say when you curse someone," he stammered, "but I curse you with a curse worse than any curse has ever been. Yes, I curse you before heaven and earth."

He held his hat crumpled between his hands and seemed suddenly small and stooped; the clothes he wore appeared too big for him.

Jeremiah laid his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "You must not speak as though she was already dead," he said gently.

Johnny took a step back, and Jeremiah's hand slipped from his shoulder. The distance between the two men was now so great that no outstretched arm could bridge it. Jeremiah looked up at the sun; it hung a space above the brow of the hill. He squinted his eyes and saw between his lashes the rays of light palpably streaming from the sky like luminous planks. They passed over the land where these farmers lived, these farmers who were waiting for him, to whom the Lord had sent him. They spanned the valley upon which the locusts had descended, and with the locusts the usurers; this valley that was waiting for the bringer of light and hope. They were radiant over the people who needed a miracle if they were to be saved.

Could an instrument be in error? Could his ear have deceived him and

his heart misunderstood God's commands? Could he have been stricken stupid, pursuing a chimera like a madman, not noticing that misery and death rose out of the earth wherever he set his foot?

He shook his head. "You must not say these things, Johnny," he said. "I don't know why God wishes Agnes to die, if He does wish it. But my coming here was His will, and my not resting on the way was His will—that is all I can say."

He tilted his head slightly and looked at their own shadows, which fell diagonally across the wheel ruts of the road and over the locusts that were slowly crawling amid the grass stubble.

He had wanted to say more than these few bare sentences. He had wanted to make his speech strong as something holy and firm as the rocks that stand independent of our wills. He knew it was his task to give to the man what he knew, to take from him his doubts and the hatred in his soul. It made him sad that he had not been able to do this.

Johnny walked back toward the wagon without turning to look at Jeremiah. He walked in the centre of the road, his hat still gripped in his hand. He had almost reached the wagon when he heard a woman's voice. He looked and saw a strong, big-boned woman standing in front of two old men in an attitude of vituperation. She had strong hips, big feet and sturdy bones, but a remarkably delicate and fair skin. While she talked she looked from one to the other, as though she wished to distribute equally the favours she had to deliver.

"You're two filthy old vultures," she was saying, "and if you don't get out of this region pronto, I'll come to-night with a few other women and we'll pluck you till you look like hens ready for the oven. We'll teach you to feed on carrion. We'll pull your beards until you bleat like goats. We'll drag you out of the settlement by your hind legs." She heard Johnny's footsteps and turned. "Are you another of this crew?" she asked.

"No," Johnny said. "My name is Johnny Brown. My wife is sick in the wagon and I'm looking for a hotel and a doctor if there is one."

"My name is Lydia Miller." She approached him awkwardly. "We don't have a hotel in Gnadenau, nor a doctor." She bowed imperceptibly. "But we would be very glad if we could help you."

"A bed in a warm room would help us a good deal."

Lydia wrinkled her brow and considered. There was not much room in the houses of Gnadenau, and no extra beds. But if necessary she could give up her own; they could move it into the living-room in front of the stove and build up the fire a bit.

Johnny shook his head. "No, that is asking too much. We couldn't permit that."

"We would be honoured to have you."

Johnny considered. It was so quiet all around them that all suddenly

heard the tapping. They turned and saw that the canvas wall of the wagon was moving. It swelled at one spot, then fell limp again, and there was a dull sound.

Johnny ran to the wagon and climbed up. When he reached the seat, he bent far forward over it, so that he could see Agnes.

"Did you call me, Agnes?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered, so low that he understood her only because he was holding his breath.

"Do you want something?"

"Yes."

"What?"

He leaned forward until his hands were touching the foot of the bed. The board against which he was leaning creaked, and outside the horse pawed the ground with his hoof. Flies buzzed over a spot on the floor and somewhere a tick was making its clicking sound. Then the tick stopped, the flies settled together on the spot, the horse stood still and the fibres of the wood came to rest. Because it was so still under the canvas roof, Johnny understood what Agnes was saying.

There was a long pause after she spoke. After a while Johnny asked humbly, as though to make sure he had understood aright, "Jeremiah? Shall I call Jeremiah?" When Agnes nodded he got down from the wagon and went toward the preacher, who still stood where Johnny had left him.

"She wants to see you," he called, without looking at Jeremiah.

Jeremiah nodded. He still held his head tilted, and his eyes were gentle. He was smiling, but his smile was sad and his voice had an undertone of weariness when he spoke.

"Why do you stand and clench your fists, Johnny?" he said. "You must not think that you will break my neck when Agnes is no longer here. She will see what is going on within you, and her heart will tremble." He stopped abruptly and began walking toward the wagon. When he came abreast of Johnny, he stopped and again put his hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"I am not a strong man, Johnny," he said. "You do not need much strength to kill me. Nor will I run away from you. I have given away my horse. I am staying in this valley until God's work is done. Whenever you choose, Johnny, you can send a bullet through my head or drive a knife between my ribs. Whenever you choose, and whenever God permits that to happen. Does not this thought give peace to your soul?"

He walked on, and Johnny followed him. When they came to the wagon the sun was just touching the rim of the hill. The old men were crouched in front of their tent, and Lydia had sat down by the roadside. The horses were motionless, as though asleep.

Johnny and Jeremiah clambered in under the roof of the wagon.

Agnes had closed her eyes, but her lids were quivering. Her forehead was wrinkled, and her mouth was no more than a pale, narrow line.

When she heard the men she turned her head. She raised her hand and groped toward the side until she found Johnny's arm. Her fingers closed on his sleeve and she drew him toward her. Johnny realized that she wanted him to bend down to her.

"Do you want to say something, Agnes?" he asked, bringing his head close to her lips.

"Is Jeremiah there?" she whispered.

"Yes, he is."

"I want to hear him. I want him to talk."

"Talk?"

"Tell what he sees. What there is, what it's like . . ."

"She says she wants you to talk, Jeremiah," Johnny said. "To tell what you see, what there is and what it's like."

Jeremiah went to the entrance of the wagon. He placed himself so that he could see the land and so that Agnes could understand what he said. His arms hung slack at his sides and the palms of his hands were turned outward. He could not stand erect because the roof was too low, and so he bent his head and his beard touched his chest. His voice was clear and friendly and unquavering.

Johnny had sat down on the edge of the bed. He had taken off his crumpled hat and placed it on his knees, and his wife's hand lay between his fingers. Her hand was frail and damp, and frequently it clenched convulsively, but her face had become relaxed and her mouth was slightly open, as though the better to hear what Jeremiah was saying.

When Jeremiah began to speak, those outside came closer. They stood up and came on tiptoe down the road, Lydia first, then Hilpert, and finally Lacoste, until they were all close enough to see and hear the preacher. They looked up at him, and after a while the old men took off their hats. They laid their hands one atop the other; their eyes were sad and weary and their features soft.

"What I see," Jeremiah said, "is land. Do you know how it is, Sister Agnes—land at evening, when the sun has just set? It is earth that is dry and grey and baked from the heat of the day. Clods that the farmers have hoed up, and that break when you walk upon them. The clotted soil lying in long straight rows, with the last radiance of the sun still upon them, though the shadows are already trickling among the furrows. What I see are fields that the locusts have devoured; stalks that they left because they were too woody and hard for them; branches that resisted their teeth, and the veins of leaves, which they did not like. What I see is the air that hovers over the earth like a great, fragile veil and rustles out of the valleys up to the hills and glides down from the hills into valleys. What I see is a road that leads to a village; a road that has

become a road because oxen drew ploughs and harrows along it in the spring, when the soil was soft and good and yearning for the seed. This is as it must be, the farmers thought when they sowed, and stoutly they stamped across the fields, and when they returned home at evening they blessed the Lord. A few weeks later they went out again and saw green tips sprouting from the earth, and they nodded their sturdy heads and, returning home, told their wives, and again they blessed the Lord. Thus it was for days and days; the fruit grew and the wheat flourished; the corn formed ears, and timothy and bluegrass and wild oats and sorrel flourished in the meadows. That is how it was, Sister Agnes; that is how it was until the locusts came."

Jeremiah paused briefly and then continued.

"What I see is the sky, soft and tender as it has always been. It is pale, but nevertheless it is radiant like the smile of the Lord. Above the hill is still a reflection of the sun, but the valley is already cloaked in dusk and when one peers for a while into the sky one can find stars. And I see a cloud of purple smoke at the farther end of the valley, where the village is. The people have lit fires in their stoves and are cooking supper. They do not talk, nor do they bless the land and bless the Lord. They set their teeth, close their eyes and clench their fists, and they have forgotten that God does not destroy the land or the sky or the air, but only a few grains of wheat and ears of corn, a few tomatoes and beans.

"And again I see the road, Sister Agnes, the road that is already shrouded in dusk, that advances in broad sweeps across the land to the houses of the village. I see us all on this road, you, Agnes, and you, Johnny, and myself. It is night when we arrive in the village; the street is deserted, but within us there is a light and a warmth, as there always is when one arrives after a long journey. We stop and look around, and the messengers of the Lord scurry through the darkness and knock on the farmers' doors. First one opens, then another, then many, and at last all. For they have waited for us. They are hungry, the cattle are hungry, and the locusts are in the land, but now all is well, for God has not forgotten them.

"Now all is well, Sister Agnes. The earth gives forth the fragrance of foliage and roots; it is cool and moist and dark. It is crumbly under our feet and velvety between our fingers; it is blessed by the hand of the Lord. Now all is well, for He has graciously led us to the end of this journey, and He has given tranquillity to our hearts and peace to our souls."

Jeremiah was silent; there was no sound but that of the wind in the grass, and now and then the creaking of the shaft when the horses shifted their weight. Lydia sat motionless beside the wagon, with the shadows of the two old men behind her. Soundlessly the dew trickled to earth and the mist gathered in the fields. Shyly, one by one, the stars emerged and became bright and shone compassionately over the valley of Gnadenau.

"For this is our God, for ever and ever, He will be our guide even unto death," Jeremiah murmured, and he groped his way into the dark wagon where Johnny sat beside his dead wife.

4

THEY DIE

THE MORNING AFTER Agnes's death was mist-drenched, and there was the smell of moist earth in the air. The wind was cool and the farmers shivered when they stepped out of their houses. They turned up their collars, took deep breaths of the sharp air, and mused that autumn was not far away. The damp had settled on the handles of the pumps and gathered upon their fingers when they fetched water. The stubble the locusts had left in fields and gardens seemed covered with a greyish sheen of dust, and the walls of the houses were dark and slippery and unpleasant to the touch.

The men of Gnadenau did not know where to begin that morning. In their heavy wooden shoes they shuffled across their yards, milked the cows and bedded them freshly, and everything they did dragged out and took much longer than usual. The milk stools were heavy, and cows held back the milk, and when the milking was done the pail was no more than half full, instead of three-quarters or seven-eighths. The barn doors hung awry on their hinges and the men had to push hard to open them; the animals had wallowed in their manure; and the chimneys would not draw.

It was a bad morning. A morning when unvoiced oaths lingered on your tongue and your mind was filled with bad thoughts. On such a morning hot and cold shivers ran down your back; your eyes narrowed and your fists clenched; your fingers felt soggy and your feet like lumps of lead. On such a morning you felt that God had forgotten you, had cast you by the wayside, and you were lost and accursed.

Agnes had been laid in Lydia's bed, and Johnny had sat by her side all night. A candle had burned on the little night table beside the bed, and near the candle the Bible and a prayer book had lain, both open. When the wind rushed against the house the light had flickered, but otherwise all was quiet and peaceful. Toward morning, when the candle sputtered, Johnny had risen and lit a fresh one. Not for a moment had he taken his eyes from his wife, although in the middle of the night Jeremiah had come to relieve him.

"Get out of here," he had said, without stirring. When Jeremiah hesitated he had repeated, "For God's sake, get out of here."

Jeremiah had left, and from then until morning there was no sound in the chamber.

Johnny did not notice that dawn was breaking until the door of the house opened. Then he understood that the night was past. He rose to his feet and rubbed his hand over his face. What had come had come; it could not be changed. A fellow like himself should not have married a schoolmarm; he should have stuck to his own kind; to those who were strong and could endure blows, and who knew their way in the world.

He bent down and took the thin golden chain from Agnes's arm. He tried putting it around his own wrist, but when he saw it was too small, he dropped it into his pocket. There was no sense in burying it with her. No sense, because it helped no one; and because you did not give two ounces of gold back to the earth when you knew how hard it was to dig it out.

He heard someone pumping water at the well.

"Good-bye, Agnes," he thought. "Don't think ill of me. All the talk of a coach-and-four in Cheyenne hasn't panned out, and that all about a house and children and me as your husband hasn't panned out." He shook his head. "Too bad," he whispered, "too damned bad."

The pumping had stopped; men were talking in the yard. They spoke in low voices. Then footsteps approached and someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," Johnny said, turning to face the door.

A man came in and introduced himself as Schermer. Johnny shook hands with him.

"I'm awfully sorry about this . . ." Schermer stammered.

Johnny nodded. "She was a wonderful woman," he said. "She was a teacher in Cheyenne. Taught school. I met her and we got married. I wanted her to have a fine life." He shrugged, and both men were silent for a while.

"I'm supposed to take the measurements for the coffin," Schermer said at last. He was holding a long, thin board. When Johnny nodded, he bent over the dead woman and laid the board beside her. With a pencil he marked head and foot, and then stood erect.

"What was her name?" he asked.

"Agnes. Agnes Brown."

Schermer sat down at the night table under the window. It was dark and quiet in this room, but from the rest of the house came sounds of plates being put on the table, of pails rattling in the yard, and of women talking.

"Agnes Brown," Schermer spelled out, as he slowly and clumsily wrote the name on the wood.

When he was finished, he stood up.

"We will bury her in the afternoon, if that is all right with you," he said. Johnny said "Yes" and thanked him, and Schermer left.

It was still misty and damp; the sky was grey with infrequent white

drifts. The houses sat bowed under the heavy mist. Here and there front doors were open, and behind the doors it was dark, like the entrance to some gloomy cave. Cackling, the hens ran about the dung heaps, and the haystacks of the previous year gave off a mouldy smell.

After walking a while, Schermer encountered Jeremiah. The preacher was coming toward him, and in spite of the mist Schermer recognized him long before he saw his face and his beard. Lydia had described him well when she went to see Schermer in the evening about the coffin. "He's tall and gaunt," she had said, "and one of his shoulders is lower than the other. When he walks, he seems to be bracing himself against something in his path."

"God greet you, brother," Schermer said, and stood still.

"God bless you," Jeremiah replied.

They shook hands and introduced themselves. Suddenly the preacher swayed and would have fallen had not the other held him upright.

"Are you sick?" Schermer asked.

Jeremiah nodded. It must be a fever that had taken hold of him. He had felt it for the first time when he left Johnny in the middle of the night. He had begun to tremble and his knees had felt weak. He had dragged himself to the wagon, crawled inside and wrapped himself in a blanket. The floor of the wagon had rocked underneath him, and the air had been piercingly damp. He had lain awake or dreaming heavily until dawn.

Schermer led him to a stone by the road. It was a small, weather-beaten square of granite; the moss on it had become saturated with moisture and felt like a sponge.

Jeremiah sat down slowly. "I don't know what's wrong with me," he said in a low voice. He brushed his hand over his forehead and looked up at Schermer. "I'm sorry to keep you, brother," he whispered. "This is a bad time for sickness. There is so much to do when there are locusts in the land. So terribly much to do."

"To do?" Schermer shrugged wearily. "As long as they're wet from the mist they don't feed; they just sit around waiting, and no one can make them run. So there isn't anything to do while the mist lasts. And when they dry out again . . ." He shook his head and sighed. "There are too many of them," he said after a while. "Two swarms we could have overcome. But this deluge of three, four and five inches of locusts over the land. No one can do anything about that. It would be different if they had all come at once. If you knew that the ones you trampled to-day were trampled once and for all. If you could have said, I'll make a fire around the corn and so save this field, because the creatures don't go through fire. But all the trampling and drumming and the fires did no good. No—they did no good."

To Jeremiah Schermer's voice sounded far away. His eyes ached; he

was chilled, and his fingers were damp, even though he kept rubbing them dry on his trousers. He felt the wetness inside his shoes. Those shoes were not very good any more; they had travelled a long way from Bear Lake County to Gnadenau. Once he had sewed the sole and once he had driven a nail into the heel.

"You ought to sit down before a fire and have something hot to drink," Schermer said. "I would be honoured to have you in our house."

"You're very kind, brother," Jeremiah whispered. He ran his tongue over his dry lips and wrapped himself closer in his coat, the coat that had once belonged to Salomon. Then he braced his hands against the stone, drew up his legs and forced himself to stand up.

"I have no time to lose," he said softly. "God has sent me to you because you need me, and He does not wish me to rest." He swayed, and Schermer put his hand on the preacher's shoulder to help him stand. "I went over your fields early this morning," Jeremiah went on. "It is wonderful land that you have, and it is terrible what has happened to it." He fell silent. Schermer could see that he was trembling. "Perhaps you yourselves don't know all. Perhaps you have never lain on the ground and followed the potato vines and the onions into the earth. You may think you will at least harvest the root crops, although the locusts have destroyed the plants." He shook his head, and his voice faded into an almost inaudible whisper. "You will harvest nothing. You will dig nothing out of the earth. There are holes where once were potatoes and onions; the locusts have even attacked some of the prairie grasses."

He stopped speaking. Schermer was at a loss. The man was sick and talking deliriously, seeing things that didn't exist. When had a locust ever eaten potatoes? When had they dug into the ground to devour onions? When had they gnawed the prairie grass, which was so tough that you cut your finger if you tried to pull it from the ground.

"I must speak to your mayor," Jeremiah said, looking up at the sky. "When the mist clears they will take all that you have left." He clenched his teeth to fight the chill that was coursing through him, and for a while he could not speak.

"You ought to come to our house," Schermer said, trying to draw Jeremiah along.

"No, no," Jeremiah panted, and spread his legs apart the better to resist. "First I must speak to the man who bears on his shoulders the burden for all of you, and who still does not know what to do, who is still groping in the dark, though the Lord has given him a few hours in which to save a little."

Schermer released Jeremiah. He scratched his head in perplexity. He had to make the coffin for the dead woman. He couldn't go back to Miller bringing the preacher to him. That would not do. How was Miller groping in the dark? He had seen more locust swarms in his life

than this man, and he knew very well what to do. They were not children who had to wait for someone like this wanderer to tell them what to do. Someone who told fantastic tales and who was sick and who ran around the country like a tramp.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Come with me and help me make the coffin if you don't want to yield to your sickness. After all, it's a coffin for you people. And when we're finished I'll go to Miller's with you. A few hours certainly won't make any difference."

Jeremiah closed his eyes. Again the ground reeled underfoot; he was weak and his back ached terribly. He stretched out his hand and grasped Schermer's arm, to hold himself erect. "For the dead," he whispered, "for the dead a few hours make no difference. Do you understand, brother? For Agnes it does not matter. It does not matter to her when we put her into the earth. The Lord has taken her to Himself, and she has been with Him long since; what happens here makes no difference to her, brother. That has time. She has completed her destiny. The circle is closed, whether she lies in the earth soon or late."

He paused, then released his hold on Schermer's arm and turned. "I'll go to Miller's," he whispered. "Thank you for telling me his name. God bless you, brother." He took a few steps out into the middle of the road and then stumbled into the wheel rut. He pitched forward and seemed to fall. His body bent far forward and his hand almost touched the ground. But he regained his balance. He lifted his arms and placed his fingers over his eyes. After a while he let his hands glide down his neck and shoulders until they reached his chest. He stood that way for a while, until his breathing had become more even; then he took another few steps.

Schermer looked back at him. It was bad to let the sick man go on alone, but he had to make the coffin and tend the cattle; there was no time to worry about a tramp who was no kinsman of the Mennonites.

"The Millers' house is where the woman is lying," he called after Jeremiah. Then he turned and continued homeward.

Jeremiah followed the wagon trail with his eyes on the ground. He could not set his feet directly in the wheel rut because the rut was too narrow for his wide boots. He swayed back and forth, often reaching for the bank of the ditch to hold himself from falling. He wanted to clamber to the middle of the road, but he was too weak. Finally he became too weak to walk, and he slid to the ground. He moved forward on all fours, as best he could, like some crawling beast. He stretched his arms forward and drew his knees up after him. At last he sat down on the edge of the ditch and pushed himself along the ground in a sitting position. Again and again he became so breathless that he had to rest. Sometimes darkness overwhelmed his eyes, there was a rustling noise in his head, and he lay with his face in the moist ground, struggling to breathe.

The children found him in this position. From the distance he had looked like a black mass; they thought for a while that he might be a dead animal. He did not stir. The children ran down the road until they discovered it was a man they did not know. He had a red beard; his head lay on the ground and his legs were drawn up, while his arms hung down in the ditch.

"Hey," the children called to him. When he did not move, they ran into the nearest house.

"There's a dead man on the road," they said to Kettler's mother, who was kneeling before the stove trying to get a fire started.

"What's that?" the old woman asked, turning sharply.

"A man's lying out there!" the children screamed, all talking together unintelligibly. "He has a red beard. It must be one of the strangers. His eyes are closed and he's pale and dirty. Awfully dirty and pale and dead."

The woman got up and went out with the children. Jeremiah had recovered somewhat; he had lifted his head, and when the children and the old woman came toward him, he smiled.

"Is something the matter with you?" Mrs. Kettler asked.

"I think I'm sick," he whispered.

"Won't you come in and rest?"

"I must get to Mr. Miller's."

"Did you come with the dead woman?"

"Yes."

"She's lying at Miller's."

"Yes."

"It isn't very much farther."

Jeremiah tried to get up. When the children saw that he could not stand, they came closer, and when he staggered and groped about for support, they held him up.

"You would be better to walk in the middle, sir," a boy said. When Jeremiah nodded, they helped him to reach the space between the wheel ruts.

"I don't mind if you rest on me," one boy said. "I'm used to it from my grandfather. He can't walk right either."

"Me too," another boy exclaimed eagerly, and ran to the other side. And so, on both sides of Jeremiah, with some going before and some going behind, they accompanied him through the whole village. They talked with him as their equal. Now and then Jeremiah stopped to catch his breath, so that he could speak to them. They watched his lips to understand what he was saying, but they themselves spoke loudly and very clearly because they thought that someone who spoke so low and who was so sick surely could not hear well.

Here and there women came to the doors and looked out, and men paused in their work. The air was still laden with mist, but more light

had penetrated it, and there was the faint shimmer of the sun in the sky. The farmers could make nothing of what the children were doing, but many recalled pictures of Jesus Christ our Lord and thought of His words: Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me. The thought relieved the mood of this oppressive day.

When the children and Jeremiah reached Miller's house, they left the road, crossed the yard and entered the parlour. The children fetched a chair and Jeremiah sat down. A small boy ran to the barn and came back with Martin Miller.

"The man wants to speak to you, Uncle Martin," he said, pointing to Jeremiah. The preacher tried to stand up, but could not.

"Pardon me," he said, "I am sick. My name is Jeremiah Kentrup. I came with the Browns, but I did not want to disturb you last night."

"My daughter told me about you," Miller replied. "I'm pleased to meet you. I'm sorry you're sick. If there's any way I may help you, I'll be glad to do so." He glanced at the children, who were massed together at the door. They were standing pigeon-toed, playing with their fingers or scratching their heads, and all were looking at Jeremiah. The clock ticked, and the children waited for the stranger to say something to them.

"I think you may go," Miller said.

Jeremiah turned his head toward them. "God bless you," he said, raising his hand, and the children left.

Miller sat down near Jeremiah. He folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. His face was expressionless and his eyes quietly surveyed the stranger with the red beard and the dirty clothes. You had to be suspicious of people you did not know, especially in times like these, when your lives hung by a thread and the vultures were circling for their prey. Lydia had seen this red-bearded fellow with the two old men, and he had gone away when she came. Perhaps the two moneylenders had thought of a new line, and this one with his holy face was bringing the bait. If that was it, he could save himself the trouble, this Jeremiah Kentrup.

Miller compressed his lips and leaned farther back in his chair. He waited. He would not say the first word. He was patient and he was strong. He had no reason to make the man's task easier, and he would not deign to speak if they had to sit in silence until the following day.

Jeremiah felt his mind growing clearer and more composed with every passing second. The ground still swayed beneath him. But he felt much better now that he could sit still without falling and think without at once forgetting what he had thought. He placed his hands in front of him on the table and looked at Miller with kind, friendly eyes, as though he had no notion of the other's suspicions. He tilted his head in his habitual manner and smiled, sympathizing with this man who withheld himself from him. Slowly he moved his hands together and clasped them. He

took a deep breath and then began to speak, loudly and distinctly, so that he could be heard even out in the yard.

After the preacher's first words, Miller lowered his sallow eyelids and a scornful fold appeared at the corners of his mouth. His face seemed to lengthen, and wrinkles appeared on his brow. He wanted to raise his hand and tell the stranger that he need not bother, but he decided it would be better to let him talk and enjoy in silence the man's childish statements. So this was the trap they were setting for him, the usurers. This Mr. Kentrup was an ambassador of God, was he! Someone with whom God spoke and upon whom God conferred missions. Whom He had chosen to be His instrument. No, this one didn't talk of money or interest; he spoke only of locusts and the land—in the farmer's own language, into the bargain, as though he knew all about it out of his own experience. Not a bad idea for a stupid band of moneylenders. Might have worked if you weren't one who knew that the bee has a sting and the devil a cloven hoof, even if both attributes were not at once evident.

Martin Miller drew his upper lip between his teeth. If you didn't know the world, you would surely fall into this redbear's net. You would be lulled by the gentleness of the voice and the clarity with which he spoke. He had seen it the evening before in Lydia, who had been altogether taken in by the talk of this so-called preacher. What a mountebank he was. A comedian, a magician; not half so childish as he had first thought. This was a man who knew his way around; he was more dangerous than the two old scarecrows, who at least said what they were after.

Miller set his teeth. There was a joy in feeling the pressure of his lower jaw against his upper. God would understand that one must listen in order to know what lay behind it all. He would understand that one must be sly as a fox to unmask and render harmless a thief as clever as this one. After all, he was responsible for an entire community that locusts had damaged badly enough. Men's minds had addled and the scourge of God had flayed their souls raw, so that all sorts of filth could enter. His farmers were ready to grasp at any straw, even the foul and rotten.

Miller began chewing his upper lip. He was growing impatient. It was time for the preacher to finish the introduction and come to the point. Let him drop this folderol and talk about interest and security and time limit and forced sale. It was about time the man offered the provocation for throwing him out of the house. One syllable would be enough so that Miller would show him what was what and let him know that the Mennonites wanted nothing to do with usurers disguised as prophets of the Lord.

But Jeremiah fell silent without having said a word that would give

Miller his cue. Obviously it was a subtle net these usurers were casting. They were patient fishermen who were in no hurry, who would not grow weary, but would wait for a good bite. It was as dangerous and crawling as the movements of a rattlesnake under a pile of leaves.

Miller shook his head. "Mr. Kentrup," he said, "we have no need of a prophet. We live by the laws that have been given to us, and our way is straight. The Lord has spoken and what He wished to say has been said; whatever is more than that is of evil. We remember the words of Matthew, chapter seven, verse fifteen: 'Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.' "

Jeremiah smiled. He was weak and perspiring, and his arms were trembling. But in his voice was pity for the other's blindness. "You cannot close your doors to one whom God has sent to you," he said. "You cannot thrust away the hand He extends to help you."

Miller stood up and solemnly pushed his chair against the table. Then he leaned on the back of the chair and bent forward, as he often did when his speech was urgent.

"Don't think we're stupid, Mr. Kentrup," he said. "Don't think we're unworldly because we leave our homeland for the sake of our Faith. And don't imagine you can cheat us more easily than other farmers. We're old plough horses. We come from a foreign land, but there were usurers there too, although they did not come in the guise of prophets, but in fur coats and with coach-and-four. You are sick, Mr. Kentrup. If you wish to claim our hospitality until you recover, that is all right with us. We do not send a weak man out into the street. We are honest Christians and farmers—no more and no less. If you will excuse me now . . ."

He turned and went to the door. He thought the stranger would say something else, and so he walked slowly, pausing on the threshold. The mist had lifted and the ground was once more a play of lights and shadows; the air had warmed. Everything was firm and clear, black and white, and Miller was contented with what he had said to this man. He would not forget it. He would realize that his seed wouldn't take on this land. He would have to find other hunting grounds for his pious blabber.

Miller strode across the yard. For a moment he looked at the children who had escorted the stranger. They were standing close together at the well, strangely silent for children. Miller remembered that a dead woman lay in his house. He tried to slow his stride, and he was walking stiffly and solemnly by the time he came up to Caroline and Lydia, who were waiting for him in front of the barn. He felt the women and children staring fixedly at him, and their stares disturbed him, made him unsure of himself.

"Let us go," he said when he reached the women. Caroline stood up.

"Yes, Martin," she said.

She bent to pick up the spade that lay on the ground, then took the

hoe and the pot lids. Miller took the tools from her and placed them on his shoulder.

"You are coming," he said to Lydia.

The girl stood up. She brushed her hair back from her forehead, then dropped her arm. "Yes, I am coming," she said. "I am coming because I must tell the others that Jeremiah Kentrup is not one of the usurers. I am coming because I do not want an injustice done. We have enough misfortune without rebuffing the hand of God."

She spoke in a clear, ringing voice. The children heard every word, as before they had heard all that went on between Jeremiah and Miller. They glanced anxiously at the group and leaned against one another, their hands touching and their naked toes digging small holes in the ground.

Miller lowered his eyelids and said with a touch of scorn, "You are a poor witness, Lydia. It hurts me to say it to you, but it is so. I can wish nothing better than that you speak for him. It will bring new shame upon me, but it will serve our cause. Kentrup might be God's only-begotten Son and no one would believe him if you bore testimony for him."

He did not wait for his daughter to reply, but set out across the yard. Caroline followed him after a moment's hesitation. She walked with bowed head and lowered eyes, and no one could say what she was thinking.

When Miller passed the well where the children stood, a small boy went up to him. "Mr. Miller," he said, then flushed and could not go on.

"Hey?" Miller asked, running his eyes along the row of children.

"He wants to ask something," a girl cried out.

"What?"

"About the man," the girl murmured.

The boy who was standing in front of Miller shifted his feet. His legs were brown and spindly and his toes grey and dust-covered. He had bristly, red hair, and held his strong hands clasped as though in prayer.

"Well, what do you want?" Miller asked quietly.

"We would like to show the man the land, Mr. Miller," the boy stammered.

"Show him the land? The man is sick."

"He can walk if we lead him, sir."

"Did he say he wants to see the land?"

"No, sir."

"Then why do you want to show it to him?"

The boy did not answer, and the other children moved about uncomfortably.

"We like to help him along," the girl whispered at last.

"What's that?"

"We see who can stand it longest when he leans on one of us."

Miller shook his head. "All of you, go home," he said. "The man has a disease and none of you must touch him. He has fever and he may have the plague of leprosy. No one must go near him until he is healed. We cannot have sickness besides all our other misfortunes."

The children stood stubbornly still.

"Did you hear me?" Miller asked.

The children fixed their eyes on the ground. They pawed the earth with their feet; little heaps of earth rose around their heels. The girls wiped their hands on their aprons and scratched themselves; but because they were all standing together they were not afraid and did not run.

The red-haired boy was the only one of them who stood alone, not knowing what the others were doing. He looked around cautiously, and when he saw them still standing he, too, stood and waited.

"How long are you going to take?" Miller asked. He lifted the tools from his shoulder and put them down on the ground.

The children started as the tools clanked together. They looked up nervously, and the red-haired boy took a step backward.

Caroline touched her husband's arm. She did not want him to excite and anger himself, and do something he would regret. "Go now," she said to the children. "The stranger is sick and must rest. He has come a long way and has been taken ill. It's naughty of you to want to play tricks with him. You ought to be ashamed . . ."

"There he comes," the red-haired boy interrupted, and pointed to the house. Caroline turned involuntarily, and even Miller turned his head.

Jeremiah had come out the door. He had heard all that had passed between the children and the grown-ups. At the first words he had tried to stand up, but had been too weak. He had dropped back into his chair, and almost fallen to the floor. But, although he clung to the table and felt the room spinning around him, he knew he must go out. He must go to the children whom God had sent to him. He must not weaken now, when it was all-important to be strong. He must not fall and close his eyes and rest. What was happening now in the yard was important to them all.

Again he stood up. It was at this moment that Caroline began to speak. If he could cross the threshold now, he would be in time. He took a step away from the table, supporting himself on the back of the chair. He forced one foot to move another step, and dragged the chair along with him as a support. Again he stopped. The light from the door blinded him. He narrowed his eyes to slits. That helped. Again he moved forward. The sun from the doorway was touching his feet and his shins. Now there was only one step to reach the door. No, more than one step. Two steps. Three steps. And then there was the door-frame to lean against. He could rest for a moment. They would see him and come for him. And if they did not, he could call. He opened his mouth to call, but his voice

was faint; as long as the woman was speaking they could not hear him.

And so he stepped out the door. He propelled himself around the door-jamb, lifting his feet clumsily over the threshold. He was in the yard now. He stood without leaning against anything, but he knew that the wall of the house was behind him for support in case he grew weak.

When the red-haired boy saw that Miller had turned his head to look, he began running across the yard. He passed so close to Caroline that she might have stopped him by putting out her arm. But he was far past her before she noticed.

The other children had grasped the situation at once. They had seen how the red-haired boy ducked before he ran. They held their breath, and laughed when he raced past Caroline. They cried "Hop, hop," and then they themselves began running. The pounding of their bare feet on the dry ground was like a distant drumming, and beneath each boy was a moving puff of dust.

When the sound faded, the little puffs of dust hovered like a fine mist over the yard; and behind this mist stood Jeremiah in the midst of the children. He had stretched his arms over them, as though to take them under his wings. They pressed so close to him that their bodies would have held him up had he lost consciousness. Their heads were turned and they were watching Miller, who still stood with the handles of the spade and the hoe in his hand. His face was wooden.

Then he suddenly dropped the tools, which fell rattling to the ground. Deliberately he crossed the yard until he stood before Jeremiah and the children. He held his right hand between two buttons of his coat.

"I order you to leave my yard at once, Mr. Kentrup," he said dryly and evenly. "I hope I do not have to make myself clearer."

He drew his watch from his pocket, lifted his head slightly, and with narrowed eyes and haughty expression said:

"The children have thirty seconds to go home. Whoever remains here will be punished according to the laws and ordinances of the community." He stared at the second hand.

"His watchmen are blind," Jeremiah quoted gently, "'they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs.'" He smiled and began walking. The children remained as close to him as possible, glad that the thirty seconds were not yet up. They were obeying Miller's order. They were on the way home. The stranger had a right to go with them and no one could forbid him. They supported him as well as they could, and when they passed Miller they avoided looking at him.

When they reached the road, they breathed easier, and many of them looked back surreptitiously at Miller. They wanted to see whether he was following them. They had heard steps in the yard and thought he was following and watching to see whether they were going home. But it was only Lydia; they need not be afraid of her. And so they walked

slowly along with this tall man who had said that God had sent him.

They had all heard it, but only a few had believed. Most of them thought that Jeremiah was a stranger unlike other strangers and that he must be helped because he was sick and could not walk alone. They were glad they could show how sturdy they were. They could hold up this man and prevent him from falling; they could lead him and clear stones from his path. And they were brave because there were many of them, and none of them would be blamed since all were doing the same. The few who believed what Jeremiah had said remembered their tales from the Scriptures and imagined themselves as 'disciples of the Lord. They fixed their eyes on Jeremiah, and whenever he smiled they smiled too.

The red-haired boy was one of the believers. He was Kettler's brother and was known in the village as "Carrot," because his mother always referred to him in this way. He was a reticent child, although he always played with the others. He was by nature both strong and gentle, and the other children usually followed his lead. It had been he who first heard Jeremiah's voice in the yard. He had stood still and listened, and then the others had imitated him. So they had all heard, and all had felt that what Jeremiah said was wonderful. But to Carrot it was the truth, and he had clenched his fists in rage when he heard Miller's reply. He could not understand why their elder spoke so scornfully to one who was sent by God. But afterward, facing Miller, he had not had the courage to say this.

Now he walked beside Jeremiah, and the preacher had put his arm around his shoulder. He felt the stranger's weight, and he walked slowly and carefully.

"Where shall we go, sir?" he asked after a while.

"To the locusts," Jeremiah replied in a whisper. "They must not be allowed out of sight for a moment. I saw them early this morning. They seemed strange to me."

Again dizziness overcame him and he would have fallen had not the children held him. They braced themselves against him, and he leaned against their hands and rested until he felt stronger.

He lifted his arm and brushed his hand over his eyes.

"You are strong," he said. "Isn't it terribly hard to hold a heavy man like me?"

The children laughed. Hard? Nothing at all. Many of them could already guide the plough, and when they pitched hay they took loads on their forks that were bigger than they themselves.

After a while they stopped chattering. The village was oddly quiet. The houses seemed asleep. The windows were open, but no sound emerged from them, and even the hens were silent; they were basking in small holes in the warm ground. A swarm of flies hovered over a heap

of manure and then settled upon it, and here and there, before an open door, sat a cat washing its face.

"We must go to our parents," a little girl said. The others were silent. They looked around, and Carrot looked up at Jeremiah.

"Must we go, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," the preacher replied, "you must go."

"And you, sir?"

"I would like you to take me to the field that is full of locusts. There was something strange about them in the early morning."

"They were wet from the dew, sir, that's all."

Jeremiah shook his head. "I don't know."

"Did God tell you there was something strange about the locusts, sir?"

"No."

"Didn't He speak to you all day long, sir?"

"No. He does not speak often. But He is always there, even when He does not speak."

They made their way down the street, and when the village lay behind them they turned off from the road. They propelled Jeremiah through the ditch and up a small hill. He could only go slowly and step by step. When he reached the top he saw that they were on a small plateau where two cherry trees and a scattering of broom grew. The ground was thick with locusts and their bodies smelled as though they were boiling in the sun. A few bare stalks projected into the air; they were yellow and wooden, and between them lay two large, pink, round stones.

"If you want you can sit here, sir," Carrot said. "It isn't far and we can come for you toward evening."

"When is the woman being buried?" one of the girls asked.

"Around dusk, they say," the boy answered.

After a silence, he added, "It's the first person buried here, sir. We haven't even had a graveyard up to now. But Schermer's always had the boards ready for the coffins. Did you hear the hammering before? That was Schermer making the coffin."

They encircled Jeremiah, who had sat down on a stone. They were impatient and hot, and they were thinking of their parents and of Miller. They would have to help themselves, and there would be no protection for them, even though they were many. They no longer understood how they had found it so wonderful to support this man and to be strong; their faces had become nervous and their voices unsteady.

But Carrot was unchanged. "Will God help us with our parents, sir?" he asked. "Will He see that nothing happens to us?"

Jeremiah shook his head. He placed his hand on the boy's head and then he looked around. He saw that they were all watching him with outstretched necks and furrowed brows and open mouths, eagerly waiting for what he would say.

"He will be with you if you believe in Him," he said. "And He will help you if you yourselves are strong."

The children did not know quite what to make of this, but Jeremiah's voice was so gentle and kind that their fear of their parents diminished and they breathed easier.

"Thank you, sir," Carrot said. "If I can I'll come at lunchtime. I can do that because no one watches out for me."

"Thank you, sir," the other children murmured. They began straggling away, turning once or twice to look at him. Each time they turned Jeremiah raised his hand as though in blessing.

Then they vanished around a turn and the preacher slid down from the stone to the ground. He turned on his side, stretched out his arm and laid his head on the arm. This way he could lie amid the locusts and follow their activities until he knew certainly that he had not been mistaken; something strange had happened to them.

At first they had presented the same horrid sight he had always seen, with perhaps the only difference that they seemed more ravaging and horrid than anything he had seen before. The sienna branch of a blackberry vine curved in a gentle arch above the ground, and a few gnawed stalks of yarrow thrust into the air. Twigs had been shaken down from the cherry trees, and the skeletons of leaves. They were manipulated about, tossed like flotsam in the lively sea of locusts. They moved for a few seconds as though alive, like the upthrust arms of a drowning man. Then they were immersed again and nothing remained but the flood of locusts that surged ankle-deep over the land.

The smell was the same as that which always accompanied the locusts. Sweetish and rather fragrant from the withered leaves and grasses, and stale and repulsive from the yellow liquid that dripped from the locusts' mouths and the excrement from their vents. But now and then the wind brought another smell. It was almost imperceptible, and vanished so swiftly that Jeremiah could not recall what it was. It evoked fugitively the smell of toadstools on meadows in autumn, or of brackish water on hot days.

Jeremiah closed his eyes and listened. He heard the crawling sounds their legs made as they stepped on the wings and heads of those underneath, and the rubbing sound of their bodies against one another. He heard also the crackling of leaf ribs and of leaves that had not been devoured. And he heard the gnawing and chewing of their mandibles. A tremor passed through him. What could they be eating? What remained here, what abundant feast was being consumed with this terrible sound of tearing and gnawing? In this devastated meadow, where were the leaves and the grass they were rending and devouring?

Jeremiah bent forward, holding his breath. The locusts settled in his

beard, crawled into his shirt and flew against his head. They were fat; they had eaten their fill and they moved complacently. Their faces were evil as they had always been; their legs were strong and their armour and wings glistened in the sun. But what on earth were they eating?

Jeremiah stretched out his hand and took one of them between his fingers. The creature defended itself, but the strength in its legs seemed less than he remembered. The abdomen was a plump bulb. Jeremiah crushed it with a firm pressure of his fingers. The armour broke, the gut was squeezed out. For a few seconds the legs kicked and the antennæ twitched. Then it was dead, and Jeremiah let the remains fall.

They fell on a small round stone. They had become a formless blob, out of which bits of leg and wing projected. The blob was so close to Jeremiah's face that he could see every detail: the locust face and the thorax, one hearing organ and a fragment of gut and foot. But after a while the details merged and again a mist filled Jeremiah's mind. His eyes were hot and watery. The pink stone and the locust corpse and the woody stub of a stem of heather mingled and became a pool of colour that rose and fell as though breathing.

Jeremiah felt the cold sweat on his forehead and a sensation of strangling in his throat. He tried to get up. He propped his elbow on the ground and supported his head in his palm. His hair was wet. The locusts that were perched all over his head began crawling as soon as they felt the motion of his body. He snatched at them and crushed them against his clothes and under his clothes. When he removed his hand he could feel their dead bodies on his chest or falling inside his shirt or down to his stomach.

Stone and locust corpse were still no more than a pool of colour that manifested a repulsive life. The smell of his hand from the remains of the crushed locust was so revolting that he wanted to wipe it off on his trousers. But he abandoned the idea because he felt he would lose consciousness completely if he attempted the motion.

But the smell penetrated his brain, condensing into a yellow fog of the same consistency and colour as locust spittle. On his palate the odour became taste, and Jeremiah swallowed convulsively several times to rid himself of the taste. He had little saliva, and his tongue felt like an alien organ, as though no part of him at all.

The stone and the locust corpse were now so enormous that they filled the entire landscape. Like some distant spot seen through a telescope, they were enormous, and looking at them absorbed the whole faculty of the eye. But Jeremiah saw that a change had taken place. The pink of the stone had turned green and the smooth round surface had become uneven, as though leaves and moss were suddenly growing out of it.

Jeremiah tried to discern the forms and outlines of the confused and

distorted image. He squinted his eyes until the accumulated tears ran down his nose. He set his teeth, tensed the muscles of his neck, and strove with all his force of will to clear his mind.

He succeeded, and the colours of the puddle took on form. They drew together; the surfaces became figures with sharp outlines. He saw them clearly now, and beside them were their shadows. The round stone and the heather and the locusts on the stone. A whole mass of locusts, no different from other locusts, sitting upon one another and upon the corpse that Jeremiah had dropped.

Without pause new locusts came crawling up. The stone, which had been bare before, seemed suddenly to have a peculiar attraction for them. Those passing nearby turned aside from their course. Those that had been sitting motionless in the sun and stretching their legs began moving toward the stone. Those underneath the bodies of other locusts poked their heads into the air, stared and after a moment's consideration decided to join the pilgrimage.

Jeremiah thought of the smell on his hand. Could it be the stench of the dead body that was luring the creatures? Were they coming to consume their own carrion? Was the heap of locusts on the stone glutting itself on the gut of its dead sister?

He stretched out his hand and carefully drove away the insects on top. They went unwillingly, clinging as long as they could to those underneath. They seemed intoxicated or drugged. But finally he had cleared them away and could see the underlayers.

They were packed so close together that none could move without stepping on its neighbour. Their heads were all turned toward a single point: the dead body. They were feeding on it, feeding on the intestines and the shell of the abdomen, on the interior of the thorax. They were eating all the soft and fatty part of the locust, chewing and munching as they would on a leaf or a blade of grass. They set their feet on the hard outer armour and took the juicy parts between their teeth. Then they tugged until the bite came loose. They were in continual motion, and as soon as one had seized his portion and tumbled back, the gap closed immediately and the one that had fed was compelled to crawl over the others to return to the banquet table. They did not fight for the pieces of gut, but the one that came first ate first, and the ones that did not eat died and were eaten in turn.

Could this be the sound of gnawing and munching that Jeremiah had heard in the meadow where nothing was left for a locust to eat? Were the weak and the sick ones dying and being consumed by those that remained? Was the swarm now living on itself?

Jeremiah followed the motions of one insect that was obviously satiated. It left the others at their meal and with slow, unusually clumsy motions stumbled away. When it came to the side of the stone, it

hesitated for a moment. Its abdomen remained pointed downward, its wings vibrated as though weak or weary. Although the sun was still high in the sky, its body seemed dull, without the usual sheen. After a while it propelled itself along. It still moved three of its legs in unison. The face, as of old, was wicked, cold, and the eyes on the side of the head were expressionless. The forehead was still straight and hard, the thorax like a knight's armour. The antennæ still waved on its head, and its feet clung still to every irregularity of the stone. But it had changed. There was something about it that was different, something that almost awakened sympathy. It had the air of weakness and death of a fly in autumn that has forgotten to die.

When it came to the brink of the stone, it crawled cautiously along the circumference until it came to a place where the side dropped straight away. It seemed on the point of leaping, but then it changed its mind and tried to crawl on. It slipped and tumbled to the ground.

Beside the stone was a small patch of sand, whose tiny yellow grains glistened in the sunlight. A thin and wavering line of dry twigs and bits of bark was delicately drawn upon the sand. It had been formed when the spring rains washed the stone, depositing morsels of wood on the first flat surface.

Toward this the locust crawled. When it perceived the line of wood, which for it was like a formidable dam, it hesitated. It remained still for so long that Jeremiah thought it had died. He bent down as close as he could, and was about to pick it up when he saw that it was lowering the hind part of its body slowly, almost imperceptibly, to the ground.

It was a gentle movement, and when the abdomen touched the soft, warm sand, a quiver passed through the locust's legs and wings. Slowly it brushed its abdomen over the grains of dust, as if to make sure this was really what it was seeking. Like a sheltering roof the stiff, gleaming wings spread over the hinged body; thorax and head were maintained motionless on stiff legs, as though knowing nothing of what the rest of the body was doing.

Jeremiah propped his head in his hands and waited. He guessed what was about to happen. His mind was clear now, and he felt cradled in the warmth of the day in the yielding soil beneath him. With extraordinary clarity he saw everything that went on. The air seemed suddenly to have taken on an unnatural transparency, wherein colours glowed and the most minute object was large and sharply outlined.

Now the locust's body was resting motionless on the ground. It had found the place it sought, where the sand was not too hard and where the sunlight and the rain and the morning dew could fall without hindrance. Here it would deposit all that would remain of itself.

The kindly warmth of the sun caressed the hills and valleys of the earth, the waters of rivers and seas, and all things that grew and breathed.

It caressed the back of the locust that had bent its heavy abdomen to the earth and dug its feet into the ground, while its muscles expanded and contracted and the lower part of its body chiselled a tiny hole in the sand. It was like a worm digging its way into the earth; its movements were patient and purposeful, as they had always been since there were locusts on the earth. Sometimes its wings quivered, or it forced itself backward with a thrust of its legs, but for the most part it remained exquisitely dispassionate, indifferent to its own action of making a bed for its brood.

Then all motion stopped. The locust's abdomen had sunk to almost a quarter of its length into the ground. The sand must have felt warm, satiny and tight around its body. Wonderful the feeling must have been, in the warm, dry beauty of this day to know that its time was fulfilled and the fruit of its body ripened. And so it opened itself and dropped its seed into the earth; and all was well with its locust life.

Jeremiah smiled and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the locust had withdrawn its abdomen from the earth and was couched, quivering slightly, beside the line of twigs and bark. The sand had slipped back into the little hole it had dug; a minute depression was the only outward trace of a divine miracle.

After a while the locust began crawling along the tiny dam. It moved slowly, and Jeremiah saw that it was weak unto death. It lurched and almost fell with every step; pebbles and small pieces of wood were great obstacles in its path. It was as though life had already departed from it and there remained only an involuntary twitching of the muscles.

When it could no longer lift its legs, it dragged its heavy trunk along the ground. Behind it a fine trail remained in the sand. The locust itself became covered with grey dust, until it looked indeed like a worm. Neither eyes nor forehead could be seen, and between the mandibles hung dust. Its wings were like withering leaves, and from the hind part of its body hung a thread of slime that clung to the sand.

Finally, it was still. The legs vibrated now and then, but the rest of the body was inert and almost invisible.

But others were still living. Not all the locusts were dead that had come in swarms to Kansas. They still moved in masses over the stripped earth, and while some laid their eggs in the ground and died, the others, whose time had not yet come, grew hungrier from hour to hour.

And because this was so, because they could not help themselves and because God so willed it, they devoured the dead. Whatever creatures fell and moved no longer, and smelled like locusts, were torn to pieces.

This was the sound of gnawing that Jeremiah had not understood. This was their food since the corn and wheat and the bark of trees had all been devoured.

Jeremiah shook his head. He could hear the sound of their feeding

clearly now. A breeze brought the repulsive smell of mushrooms on autumnal meadows; and the fog settled gently around his mind once more.

The last thing he saw was three locusts falling greedily upon a grey form that looked like a worm.

Then Jeremiah closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The perishing of the locusts had begun the evening before on the hills around Gnadenau. But only individuals here and there had come to the fullness of their time; then the night had descended, and with the night, sleep under the heavy mantle of the dew. All movement ceased; the fruit of their bodies remained undelivered because their muscles were numbed by the wet and cold.

As always they had crawled together into clusters at dusk, but sharp eyes would have detected that they were sleeping differently from the way they had always slept. Their bodies lay closer together, forming a compact mass, like heaps of larvæ crowded sluggishly in the furrows of fields.

Neither the Parkers nor the Biebers had noticed as yet that the end of the locust time was at hand. The Parkers were busy with the new horse that Providence had given them; it seemed to them more magnificent than any animal that had ever inhabited their barn. The Biebers had seen so much of locusts that they had lost their eye for them, and their minds were so filled with cares and brooding that they took no notice of what went on outside.

The only one who suspected the change was Betty Maxwell. She had observed dead locusts, and live ones devouring the dead. At first she had been unwilling to believe her eyes. On the journey to Kansas she had seen again and again what happened when swarms could no longer find food: they rose into the air and flew on. That locusts would die of starvation and be eaten by the survivors was something she had not yet imagined of this scourge of God. As long as there were lands that had not yet been stripped, locusts did not fall by the wayside; as long as there was still wheat and corn to be eaten, they did not consume one another. There must be some deeper reason for this metamorphosis from a swarm of migrating, ravaging locusts to a band of sluggish carrion eaters, glutting themselves torpidly on the cadavers of their own kind. Something must have happened that had nothing to do with external conditions; something must have changed within the locusts themselves. This change of heart in the creatures made them suddenly unendurable to Betty.

She had gone home and eaten supper with the others. Then she had taken Homer's arm and walked over the fields with him. The locusts were asleep by then; the air was damp and misty, and the coolness of evening chilled their spines.

"I'm sick of it, Homer," she said, when the house lay far behind them and nothing could be seen but the faint glow of the lamp in the room. "I don't want to interfere with you in business matters, but I'm sick of it."

The little man planted himself in front of her and thrust his thumbs into the armholes of his coat.

"How interesting," he replied. "You're sick of it. You're sick of it because it's all your fault. It's your fault that we're here at all. It was you who let George Hutter (God rest his soul) make a fool of you. And then, after we get here, you haven't the heart to carry out your wonderful plan to milk the farmers. You're sick of it, I suppose, because the first night you arrive all you can find to do is save a kid's life. And then run around fixing wells and acting the maid of all work. You were going to talk them into despairing, and instead you wouldn't let them despair. You didn't anticipate that you'd have to dig gold out of dirt. You have the heart of an angel and the mind of a cow."

While talking he had rocked his body back and forth from heels to toes and toes to heels, and his small grey eyes had sparkled with scorn. Then he became angry. "What kind of nonsense is this?" he screamed. "Like a madman I go bumping through the countryside to find a fish that'll bite, and when I've finally caught him my wife knocks the hook out of my hand. All of a sudden she discovers a love for the land. All of a sudden she despises her husband for being a moneylender. She finds she has pity for these stinking farmers and decides we ought to go easy on their dirty hides."

He paused and looked at Betty out of narrow eyes. All the while she had stood listening in silence, and at last she had turned her head away. Her face had paled, and the dusk had settled around it like a thin film of dust.

Maxwell became calmer. "Look here, Betty," he whispered. "let's not quarrel about this business. I guess the locusts have made us a little crazy too. There must be something about the damned things that clouds your mind. There's something in the air when they're around." He cleared his throat and dropped his arms, waiting for her reply. But Betty stood wordless, looking at the ground. Maxwell could think of nothing further to say, and so there was a long silence.

At last Betty looked up. "Do you know the locusts are dying?" she asked.

When he shook his head uncomprehendingly, she told him what she had seen. At first she spoke truthfully, but soon she began to embellish the story. "Thousands are already lying dead beneath the living," she said. "It must be some plague that has attacked them. The air is warm and it's not raining and this is the middle of the summer, and yet the locusts are dying. Some kind of disease must be spreading among them, and the sick ones are infecting the healthy ones. Maybe it's in the spittle that drops from the mouths, or in their excrement, or maybe in the stink

they give out. It must be some kind of invisible poison. I think it sticks to their legs and bodies, and when they fall dead they infect the ground itself."

She paused and looked squarely at him. "Homer," she said, "the living are eating the dead. The ones that can still crawl and aren't yet poisoned are falling on the others and tearing them to pieces, glutting themselves on the ones that have died of the plague. In a few days, maybe by to-morrow, all this crawling, kicking mob will be nothing but a stinking, greasy bog sticking to the ground and poisoning it. There's a curse on this land."

Again she paused, and when she began again she made her voice matter-of-fact.

"I'm really sick of it, Homer," she said. "And maybe I am too soft-hearted. I didn't think of the ones we were cheating as human beings. When you sit in a room in a city and figure out everything on paper it seems easy. You say, Farmer So-and-so, and you don't think that his name is Heinrich Bieber and that he has a wife and baby. For business like this you ought to stay in the city and send someone to do the job. If you send someone, he can say to the farmer, 'I'm sorry, Mr. Bieber, it isn't my fault. I'm just an employee, Mr. Bieber, and if I come back without doing what I have to do, I'll lose my job. You have a child, Mr. Bieber, but I have two children and my children want to eat, and my children are my children. After all, Mr. Bieber, you're a stranger to me, and blood is thicker than water.' That's what we ought to do—send a man like that. We ought to have enough money to pay a man, but if we haven't got it, then we ought to stick to business that won't spoil our sleep. Stolen horses never gave us bad dreams, Homer; when they hanged George, that was an accident, and we got over it. But this thing here is so stinking lousy that I get sick when I think of it."

Darkness had come. The little man stood numb before her. A dog howled in the distance. After the howl died away, everything was so still that they could hear the faint sucking sound the earth made as it absorbed the evening dew.

After a while Maxwell turned and began walking home. Betty followed him. It had become so dark that she stumbled in the wheel ruts and was able to find the path only because the light was still burning in Bieber's house.

Just before they reached the farmyard the man came to a halt.

"Is that true about the locusts' dying?" he asked.

"Of course it's true."

"And you think it's some kind of plague?"

"How do I know?"

"But you think so."

"I don't know."

"For Christ's sake, do you or don't you think so?"

"What else can it be? They've suddenly begun to die instead of flying on."

They walked on in silence until they came into the house. Then they sat down at the table with the Biebers. No one talked; the baby slept and the Bible remained closed at Bieber's elbow. The mist had risen from the valley to the plateau and the windows were now opaque with moisture. At last the mist hid the stars also.

But by then all in the Bieber house had gone to sleep.

The following morning was as damp, cool, dismal and unpleasant on the hills as it had been in the valley of Gnadenau. The wind beat large and small fragments of mist among the stubble in the fields, and the gnawed stalks were mournful in appearance. The ground was spongy and squished when stepped on.

Parker awakened after daybreak. Carefully, he slid his hand under the cover and laid in on Patricia's belly. He wanted to feel whether his child was awake yet. His child, after all, had a life of its own now. It moved as it pleased; it was something that was as good as in the world.

When nothing stirred, it occurred to him that it was still too early in the morning for so small a baby. And so he slipped out of bed. He felt the raw dampness of the air, and bent down to tuck the edges of the cover under Patricia's body. Then he tried to look out the window, but it was misted over. A few drops of water had accumulated on the table; they must have trickled through the roof during the night. He must repair the roof before the rainy season came. He had patched it hastily, but it was still in such bad shape that ordinary morning mist seeped in.

He went outside and felt the impact of the cool air on his eyeballs. Turning up his collar, he went over to the old horse; he had had to tie it out in the open. With a rag, he began rubbing it dry. Its neck and mane were wet and felt cold, but the back and sides, where the blanket covered them, were warm and dry.

The horse turned its head when it felt his touch. It looked profoundly at Parker and then lowered its muzzle almost to the ground. It was an old, experienced beast and knew that all was well. It snorted and sniffed along the ground, blinking its eyes sleepily the while and pricking up its ears when Parker paused for a moment in his rubbing.

When the rub-down was over, the horse raised its head and gazed after the man as he walked to the well and pumped water. Parker brought back a full pail and put it on the ground. The horse began drinking the clear, cold water.

Meanwhile Albert went to the shack that would be his barn in the future. He milked the cow, squatting at her side on the small, three-legged stool and pressing his head against her belly. She gave more milk

than he had expected. The place already had the barn smell, and the odour of burning was almost gone. It was warm although there was no glass in the opening in the wall.

After he had finished milking he fetched the eggs from the hen house. He found four eggs in the straw and one in the corner near the fence of chicken wire. It was a good morning. Everything they needed was here, and for the present there was no sense in worrying how they were to go on. They had a horse again, and if the locusts ever vanished they would still have a little left. The potatoes, at any rate. And the onions, and a few beets.

When he returned to the house he found Patricia in the kitchen. They kissed. "How is the horse?" Patricia asked.

"Good. Dry as stale bread."

"Has he eaten?"

"No."

"He must have something to eat."

"Hm."

"Well?"

"I'll see whether he'll eat the cornstalks if I chop them up. If not, I'll have to fetch wild grass."

"And the cow?"

"The same for her."

They ate their breakfast and left the house immediately after. They took knives to cut the cornstalks, and walked unhurriedly through the vegetable garden, which was barren except for a few bare tomato and bean vines. It was still misty, but clearer, so that they could see the locusts in the furrows. It was as they were crossing the road that they discovered the first dead locusts. They found a small heap between the wheel ruts; it looked like sweepings that the wind had piled in a corner. Parker bent down and took up a handful of the creatures. They were cold and damp, and did not move.

He shook his head in bewilderment.

"They're dead," he said. "They look almost alive, but they're as dead as our oxen. The devil has torn out their insides. Their bellies have burst and the gut is hanging out of the holes."

"They must be frozen," Patricia said. She took one of the dead insects between her fingers and lifted it to her eyes to examine it more closely.

Parker laughed. "Frozen?" His eyes sparkled. "Frozen in the middle of July?" He tossed away the dead insects he had held and picked up others. He laid them on the palm of his hand, and the wind wafted their legs and wings and turned their bodies over.

"They've got a disease," he announced triumphantly. "They've choked on their own greediness. They must have felt it, coming closer every day; and they knew they couldn't escape it."

He laughed again, then fell silent and looked at Patricia more soberly. "You mustn't think I've gone crazy, Silverheel," he said. "I'm all right. As sane as anyone can be who's overjoyed to see something dying that he's hated more than anything has ever been hated in this world."

He raised his hand and held the locust up for Patricia to see. "You know what's happened to them?" he asked. When Patricia shook her head mechanically, he went on, "When they ate the vegetables, they were full. Their locust stomachs and intestines were full and their bellies grew fatter every day. They had enough with the gardens; they didn't need our wheat and our corn and the bark of the trees to support their life. But the devil was in them. When the sun rose in the morning their jaws began to move and the yellow liquid gathered in their mouths. Their bellies were full and they could hardly crawl, but their greed was so great they could think of nothing else. They had to eat and weren't hungry. They had to devour everything that came between their jaws and their guts were stuffed full. They forced it into themselves until they burst. They must have felt their guts tearing gradually, their bellies opening and emptying. They felt their life pouring out of them and they became weak and stiff and then they stopped moving."

Parker took a deep breath; he had spoken almost in a single breath. The wind puffed over the hill and snatched the locusts from his outstretched hand. They whirled down through the air, tumbled along the road and finally lay still beside a large stone.

Patricia shivered with cold. She had let Albert talk on because she had felt it was good for him. Words were to men what tears are to women; her father had always said to her that a man who talked did not shoot. But his talk had made her so nauseous that she was inclined to turn away and vomit.

She put out her hand and laid it on his shoulder. "I think we ought to cut the corn, Albert," she said.

"Uh-huh," he replied. The hand that had held the locusts he wiped on his trousers.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

"Of course."

They walked along in silence until they reached the cornfield. Here and there small heaps of locusts lay in the wheel ruts, blown there by the wind. But they were few in comparison to the myriads that still crouched motionless, but strong and alive, in the furrows of the fields.

"Do you really think the end of the locusts has come, Albert?" Patricia asked at last.

Albert did not answer at once. His face was distorted and his cheekbones stood out hard beneath his skin. Then he cleared his throat, spat and said in a low voice, "I don't know."

The cornstalks were tough and difficult to cut. They could be bent and

broken, but the hard fibres resisted the knives. Finally, they tore the plants out of the ground roots and all. The roots smelled sweetish and spicy at once; their hands soon became cold and wet. Streamers of mist floated past them, passing like veils over their faces. But gradually the sky grew lighter, the mist became tattered at the edges and dissolved into ribbons. The clods of earth became dry and dusty; the cornstalks were damp only at the base and the wind was warmer.

Then the locusts began to stir, and a few minutes later, when the sun broke through the mist, the first locusts laid their eggs in the ground, now deliciously softened by the uprooting of the cornstalks. The insects laid themselves gently and trustfully against this fruitful earth and died before the soil had fully warmed.

They died under the eyes of the Parkers, who crouched over them and followed their last twitchings with malicious, joyful laughter. They died by hundreds and thousands, and Albert was blind to what was really taking place. It was enough for him to see them grow stiff and clumsy, then fall and die. It sufficed him to see the gaping wound in the abdomen and the dust between the mandibles. And he rejoiced when the others fell upon the corpses and tore them to bits.

He started when he felt Patricia's hand on his shoulder. For a time he could not understand what she was saying. Three or four times she repeated it to him, and even then he would not believe it; pregnant women had such fancies, he knew.

When at last he saw for himself that the locusts were laying eggs before they died, and that the orifices he thought were their death wounds were no more than open wombs, he roared like a wounded beast. His outcry gradually became lower and was transformed into a furious curse that lasted for minutes and passed beyond even Patricia's wide experience.

About the same time a puff of wind swept up a heap of dead locusts that lay in a furrow and tossed them, mingled with dust and withered leaves, into the Biebers' farmyard. For a while they lay in the sun between the barn and the house; the hens picked at them, taking them in their beaks and shaking them back and forth because they were too big to swallow at a single gulp. Then another puff of wind carried them along the hard ground to the threshold of the house, where they remained. They looked like a mound of chaff, and they were the colour of dust. Probably no one would have noticed them had they not cast shadows. As it was, Heinrich Bieber stopped at the threshold and stooped to see what this cluster of locusts was doing on the bare ground of his yard. This was how he discovered that the creatures were dead.

He picked them up. They were warm from the sun and felt as though

they had been rolled in flour. They appeared quite unchanged, except for the abdomens, which were empty and strangely shrunken. When he pressed the thorax, it gave without breaking. The legs were stiff and spindly.

He did not know what to make of it, and there was no one about with whom he could talk. The Maxwells had left the house early in the morning, and Clara had gone to inspect the potatoes. He himself had prayed a while and done the barn chores. For a time he had sat with the baby; then, when the sun rose, he had gone out, resolved to gather the wild grass the preacher, Kentrup, had spoken of. He had given Michael blocks from the box by the stove and gone. Upon closing the door he had looked around for his wife, expecting that she would appear any moment. It was then that he had seen the shadows of the locusts on the ground.

Bemusedly, he walked toward the vegetable garden with lowered head and dangling arms. He squinted his eyes to see more clearly, and when he reached the furrows he stooped, and finally squatted on his heels, supporting himself by placing his hands on the ground.

So he sat, looking down the small furrow no wider than a forest path. To the left and right of it was the long, hoed mound of earth, then another furrow, another row and another furrow. All this had once been green and fruitful, redolent of parsley and leeks. But it was bare now, and in the furrows lay dead and dying locusts. Along the edges of the furrows crawled those that could still move, dragging behind them the thin, threadlike remnants of their gut.

After a while Bieber progressed to the next furrow, then on to the next. When he reached the edge of his vegetable garden, he walked on until he came to the new apricot seedlings, which were stripped as white as bones. Not a single insect hung in their branches. Bieber brushed his hand over the slender trunks. They felt dry and rough; the sap, which had poured out of them like blood, had dried and become encrusted. At the base lay the clusters of locusts, as they lay everywhere else. Here and there one moved along, finally to fall over a clod of earth and lie twitching and dying.

Bieber removed his hat and wiped his head with his big red handkerchief. He surveyed his land, hilly and stripped clean by the locusts, so that everywhere the naked earth showed. There were one hundred and sixty acres, and all over these acres locusts lay ankle-deep, dying of pestilence and decaying in the sun. Over a hundred and sixty acres their bodies lay in dissolution, stinking to high heaven, and the juices of their guts would fertilize the earth. Over all his land the Lord had transformed His scourge of to-day into to-morrow's blessing; He had granted Heinrich Bieber His divine mercy.

Bieber nodded thoughtfully. Yes, that was it. The Lord did not

abandon His faithful servant. He performed miracles when you believed in Him and did not hearken to false prophets who rode around the country blabbing seditiously about men's own strength. You had to pray, to fall humbly to your knees; not raise your head in arrogance and in the pride of your strength. Now all was well. The land was here, and the earth had been fertilized by the Lord's own hands.

With deliberate stride, Heinrich Bieber returned to his house. He would take a loan from Maxwell until next summer. He need have no fear; he would be able to pay it back in time with interest and compound interest. His soil was healthy and the bodies of the locusts would make it more fruitful than ever before.

He calculated. He did not need much. There were the potatoes and the cattle; with a few hundred dollars he could buy all he would need. What were a few hundred dollars borrowed on a hundred and sixty acres of land? Especially when you knew that heaven smiled upon you. Did you not have the Lord on your side, when locusts died off in mid-summer? What were a few hundred dollars when miracles were performed for you?

Long before he reached the yard, he saw the Maxwells' wagon drawn up before the house. He could see it clearly, with its high, round roof, its green wheels, and the two dark horses in front of it. People were trotting back and forth in the farmyard—Clara and Betty carrying things to the wagon. He began to run. He brought up his arms, pressed his elbows against his sides, and his heavy shoes thundered like horses' hoofs on the hard ground. "Hey," he cried, "hey!" Clara heard him; she stood still, peered with her hand over her eyes, and then waved to him. He wanted to call out to her to tell the Maxwells to wait, but he realized she would not understand him at this distance.

Maxwell came out into the yard. Again Bieber called "Hey, hello." Maxwell looked toward him for a moment; then he turned around, clambered on to the wagon and vanished inside. Bieber saw the canvas swell as he brushed against it. He saw Betty bend down for the child, pick him up and then put him down quickly. She held out her hand to Clara. Clara nodded in Bieber's direction, and Betty shook her head, as though to say they could not wait.

"Wait, wait!" Bieber shouted. They heard his voice, and both women turned their heads. No one paid attention to the baby, who crawled across the yard and sat down on the ground in front of the horses.

Betty shrugged and climbed on to the wagon. She did not turn her head. Clara stared at Heinrich, and no one noticed the baby.

Heinrich Bieber did not have far to run now. Perhaps no more than a hundred yards, or ninety. Dear God, that was not much; only a few steps. And every step was a yard. One, two, three, four, five, eighty-five. One, two, three, four, five, eighty. Eighty yards before they ran over the

baby. Seventy-five, seventy, sixty-five, sixty. "Stop, stop!" O God, if only they would look around . . .

Bieber fell. His face struck the ground and the hard earth tore open the skin of his lip. His lip bled, and his mouth was full of sand and dust. For a few seconds he lost consciousness.

"Heinrich, Heinrich!" Clara screamed. When he did not get up at once, she looked around for someone to help. Then she discovered Michael, sitting in front of the horses and playing with dead locusts. She saw Betty's hands holding the reins, and the horses with their heads lifted. This was what Heinrich had seen.

She wanted to shout, but she could not; no sound came from her mouth. For a second she swayed as though she would fall; then she took a step, and dashed madly toward the baby.

With her hands she forced back the horses' heads, and began to scream. The Maxwells could not make out any words but it sounded as though she was laughing and crying at the same time. Betty leaned forward. She did not know what was the matter, but involuntarily she tugged back on the reins so hard that the horses reared up. Then she saw the baby.

She cursed furiously. But when the horses had quieted again and Clara had taken her baby in her arms, when the sun shone down upon Heinrich, limping wearily and dustily toward them, and upon the poor, peaceful little house in the midst of the empty landscape, she broke the midday silence with a curiously loud, "Thank God."

Then all were together in the yard. Homer stood beside the wagon, knowing nothing of what had happened; Betty sat in front of him on the box, whispering the story to him; and Heinrich sat by the pump washing, while Clara pumped with one hand and held the child with the other. The wind still propelled dead locusts and dry leaves over the dusty ground to the wall of the house, where they banked up in small, flat heaps.

The shadows of objects were shrunken and crippled because the sun stood almost vertically overhead. The noonday light filled the space between sky and earth to repletion; the weight of its rays lay upon the quivering air and bowed down the heads of man and beast.

Vaguely, Bieber heard the whispering voices of the Maxwells. It seemed miraculous to him that the two were not already lost to him, that he could still talk to them and borrow the few hundred dollars he would need until the next harvest. They would be pleased at making a deal after all; he was glad they would depart without resentment.

He wiped his face dry with the handkerchief and got up. His right cheek was scraped and tiny drops of blood were trickling from the wound. His lips were swollen and one of his upper front teeth was loose; dark, burning lumps of earth had been ground into the palms of his

hands and his trousers were torn at the knees and covered with dirt. But he was happy.

"The locusts are dying," he said. All were silent and looked at him.

When none of them replied, he put the handkerchief in his pocket and asked, "Don't you believe me?"

"Yes," Clara whispered, gazing at the ground.

"Well, then," Bieber challenged, "then everything's fine. Nothing's been lost but a single crop. God has meant well by us."

Again the others said nothing. Michael babbled softly to himself.

"Well, then, Mr. Maxwell," Bieber began again, after an embarrassed silence, "how about that loan?"

When Maxwell did not reply at once, Bieber walked past Clara and went up to the horses; here he could see the little man more clearly.

"You see, it's like this," he went on. "When people like us take a loan, they're always thinking about paying it back. We don't say, now I have the money and the future will take care of itself. We figure things out. People like us don't say yes right off; we think about it and think about it until we're sure we know what's right."

He put his hand on the head of one horse and waited, but still no one spoke.

"Yes, that's how it is," he said at last, dabbing the blood from his face. "I kept on thinking there was no way out this time. I thought there was no salvation for us, and I didn't really believe my prayers would help. I prayed because there was nothing else I could do, but I didn't have faith that God would perform a miracle just for my sake." He ran his tongue over his swollen lips and shook his head; as he continued he kept patting the horse's forehead. "I guess I owe you an apology," he said. "It wasn't right of me to have held you up so long."

Again he paused and waited for Maxwell to say something. The little man cleared his throat, but that was all. Bieber's head drooped and he began scuffing the ground with his boot. "You oughtn't to make it so hard for me," he said. "I admit I acted stupidly, but after all it was in your interest too. You know that if you give someone money and he just pockets it without thinking, that isn't right either. That kind comes running to you after the year is up and says he can't pay the interest or the principal; he says his figuring was false. And because you don't want to ruin him for a few lousy dollars, you give him more time. All right, you tell him, pay it next year when things are better with you. But next year things aren't better, and finally you have to throw him out of his own house or else lose your money."

He raised his head and looked around. The wind was in his hair and the sun in his face. Lifting his arm, he described a circle through the air.

"All this is my land, Mr. Maxwell," he said. "And everywhere on my land the locusts are dying. The air stinks from their decaying bodies, but

the carrion will fertilize the soil. In the fall I'll sow new wheat and new corn in the spring. I'll stuff the garden full of vegetables, and when you come next year after the harvest, my bins will be full to bursting." He turned his head toward Betty. "Until that time I need seven hundred and fifty dollars. Not a cent more and not a cent less."

He dropped his arm and waited.

"Seven hundred and fifty dollars," Betty repeated mechanically, without any sense of the meaning of the words.

Bieber laughed. "We can't take on a bigger debt, and we don't need more money," he said.

"Look here, my good man," Maxwell said, bending over his wife's shoulder, "we've changed our minds. At the moment we don't want to lend money, understand?"

"What?" Bieber gasped.

Maxwell shrugged and shook his head. "You explain it to him, Betty," he said.

Betty laid her big hands on her thighs. As she spoke, she kept rubbing them back and forth from her knees to her belly.

"When the fool thinks it over, the wise man does the same," she said, looking at Bieber's face without meeting his eyes. "You had time enough to take it when it was offered. But you kept saying if and but—" She stopped suddenly, opened her mouth again and scratched the corner of it. Then she compressed her lips and began untying the reins from the brake.

Bieber looked at his wife, who was slowly approaching him. She was still holding the baby, her hands clasped around his bare legs. She leaned backward slightly as she walked. Her face was pale and careworn, and she leaned her head against the baby's body.

When she came up to Heinrich, she did not look at him. "There's something else about the locusts that they haven't told you yet," she murmured.

"About the locusts?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

Clara shook her head. "I couldn't believe it myself, because it's too horrible . . ."

"For God's sake, are you going to tell me or not?"

"Yes, Heinrich, I'm going to tell you." Her eyes were brimming with tears and her voice uncertain. The baby lay quiet with his hands in her hair; the wind had stopped and they could hear the dust in the air trickling down on the straw roof.

"It's the land, Heinrich, the land. Do you know what they've done with our land?" She lifted her hand to her mouth as though to suppress a scream. "They've infested it. They've laid their eggs in it. Every one

of them spilled out its eggs on our land. Every single one had its belly full of slime. They've buried their brood in our soil. For every single one, ten or a hundred or a thousand will crawl out of the ground when the time comes——"

She broke off and bent toward him.

"What's the matter, Heinrich?" she asked anxiously.

At her first words Heinrich Bieber had closed his eyes. His heart had stopped and his breathing became short, sharp gasps. Then he had begun to sway. His head had spun away from him, far away and high above the earth, and night had settled around him and over him. It was like lying down in a bed and pulling the covers over your head, so that you knew no more of the world; you were under it and over it, rocking gently in space, then hurling and whirling through the darkness like a carrousel. And then he set his teeth, clenched his fists, tensed his muscles and opened his eyes. Before him was his wife and his child, the sun and the yard, and the hopelessness.

"So that's it," he said.

"Yes," Clara whispered, rejoicing that the colour had returned to his face.

"So of course they're clearing out now," he added, nodding toward the Maxwells.

"Yes."

Bieber turned slowly to face the wagon and began to laugh. "I must have seemed awfully funny to you," he said to Betty. "It's always funny when a man thinks he's saved and he's really knocked out for good. It's enough to make your sides burst with laughing. You think the devil's come to take the locusts back where they came from and all the time it's God Himself making them fruitful and letting them multiply a hundredfold. Just too good, too good. Funny, isn't it, when the idiot shouts for joy and thanks God? Funny when he finds out his faith is rotten at the core and all that's happened is that the locusts have emptied their fruitful bellies in his fields."

He shook his head and again laughed gratingly. "No, you don't give a man like that a loan. You give him a kick in the arse, that's all. Poor devil, you say. Believed in God's goodness. Thought the Lord wouldn't leave him in the lurch because he earned his bread by the sweat of his brow."

He spat explosively and stepped aside. "Good voyage, Maxwells," he said, and turned his back to the horses and the wagon.

"Clara, pack our things," he ordered. "We're selling out. If we can find anyone to buy this manure pile. We're selling out if we can find anyone who'll come to Kansas and take our land." Again he laughed and spat. "Our land," he repeated scornfully. "Hahaha, our land, our land."

That afternoon a kind of hushed fear lay over the land. The stripped meadows and fields had a ghostly look, though the bright daylight made the shadows on them firm and jet black. The air was heavy with the odour of decaying locusts; the wind rolled the heaps of decay sluggishly over the hills.

The road that led into the valley of Gnadenau was dusty, and the earth simmered behind protecting corners or rocks. The stones shimmered with heat waves, and the lizards couched on them did not stir. They sat with heads slightly raised, waiting, and the pulses under their lower jaws beat in unison with their heartbeat.

The locusts had spared the slope of the hill. The tough prairie grass, the blackberries and the fern had not attracted them. They loved tender, cultivated plants and hated those that the wind sowed, that lived and died by sterner laws.

Where the road approached the village the tattered tent of the old men still stood. Hilpert and Lacoste sat at the entrance with their heads in the shade. They had taken off their shoes and stockings and stretched out their bare feet. Their frayed trousers had slipped up and the sun was shining on the oddly white skin of their hairy calves. Their hands were clasped at their waists and their eyes stared fixedly over the disconsolate land. They sat this way for hours without talking, and their hearts felt heavy and old.

When the first odours of decay wafted down into the valley, they inhaled deeply through their big noses and sniffed.

"Bones," Hilpert said.

"Don't be a fool," Lacoste replied.

They sat in silence for a while, then got up and walked a few feet away from the tent, where they could smell better.

"It's a lot like it, but somehow different," Lacoste said. "It's more delicate, more like plants rotting than the decay of an animal. It reminds me of wet wheat that's got mouldy in the bin."

Hilpert shook his head. "It's sweeter," he murmured. "And it has more body, if you know what I mean."

They turned in the direction from which the odour was coming, and waited. For a long while they smelled nothing but the warm fragrance of the wind; then the odour returned. They closed their eyes, wrinkled their brows and combed their yellowish-white beards with their leathery hands. They reflected, trying to remember, and again and again they breathed deeply. So absorbed were they in their thoughts that they did not notice when Jeremiah came up to them.

He had awakened when the sun stood almost directly above him. Sitting up, he had felt that he was soaked with sweat and his clothes adhered to his body. He had taken off his shirt and dried his neck and chest with it, and then he had stood up and looked around.

He still felt weak in the knees, but his head was clear. There was a refreshed feeling in his brain, as though he had stepped out of a close bedroom into the cool dawn of a May morning. The heat of the sun struck fiercely at his naked trunk. Jeremiah stretched out his arms and clenched his hands. He tossed his head back, took a deep breath and smiled. He was himself again. Praise and gratitude to the Eternal, he was himself again.

He put on his shirt and descended the hill at an easy pace. Almost half the locusts were dead now; the wind played with them after its own sweet will. But the living still crawled haplessly and aimlessly over the bodies of the dead, or sat quivering in the sun, awaiting their end. Yet even until the last their mandibles moved, and the last thing they ate was the dust of the earth.

Jeremiah had stood observing the two old men for a while before he spoke to them.

"God bless you," he said at last. When they started in fright, he laughed spontaneously.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"We're not looking for anything," Lacoste replied.

"What then?"

The two looked at each other, uncertain how they should answer. The stench in the air might come from a distant field of bones; in that case it would be better to say nothing about it.

"Nothing," Hilpert muttered, slipping his bare feet into his boots.

Jeremiah shook his head and sat down on the third box. He picked up a pebble and began tossing it from one hand to the other while he spoke.

"You're a curious pair," he said. "You have a long life behind you, and nevertheless you've not grown wiser."

Hilpert blew his nose with his fingers, and rubbed them dry with a dirty handkerchief.

"What's that?" he inquired.

"Has it never occurred to either of you that an old man ought to be wise? Have you never thought that God has His reasons for letting a man grow old? That He means men to profit by age?"

Hilpert shook his head. "Goddam," he said. "When do men like us have time to grow wise?" He laughed bleatingly. "What kind of life does your reverend think we lead? Did you hear that, Lacoste? Old men ought to be wise. What a joke, what a joke." He walked to one side and went right on talking. "Oh, sure, if you live like a rich man with no cares. When you can spend the evening sitting under a lamp, smoking your pipe and reading a book. You can get wise fast enough if you live the life of a parson."

He buttoned his trousers, then came back, sat down at the entrance to the tent and began tying his shoes. "So we ought to be wise," he mur-

mured, while his face grew flushed from bending over. "Bone collectors and moneylenders ought to be wise. My God, wise."

Once more a wave of the odour of decay rolled down the hill into the valley. This time it was so dense that it filled the air; it was not necessary to sniff in the direction of the wind to smell it.

Lacoste looked slyly at Jeremiah. Didn't the preacher smell the stench? Did he know what it was? Why otherwise was he sitting so still on his box and smiling inscrutably?

"It stinks," Lacoste said, trying to keep his voice indifferent and matter-of-fact.

Jeremiah nodded.

"What is it?"

"Carrion."

"Oh."

The two old men had started, but instantly controlled themselves.

"What kind of carrion?" Hilpert asked, squatting on his heels. He took a stone and began pounding the post of the tent deeper into the ground.

"Locusts," Jeremiah said quietly.

Lacoste laughed. "Good joke," he exclaimed. "But seriously, where does the smell come from?"

"Locusts," Jeremiah repeated. He sounded so grave and convincing that Hilpert stopped his hammering at the post and looked at him. Lacoste bent forward and opened his mouth, the better to hear.

"The locusts are dying," Jeremiah went on. "You need only take three steps away from your tent into the field, if you don't believe me. It began early this morning, and half of them are dead already. By evening not a single one will be left alive."

The two old men crossed the road without a word. There the locusts lay like brown puddles in the furrows. Hilpert and Lacoste stood for a long while in the bright sunlight, then slouched back toward Jeremiah. Their faces had become grey and sunken, and their eyes had that look of infinite sadness that comes only into the eyes of old men. The Adam's apples in their long, gaunt necks bobbed up and down as though they were swallowing steadily, and their weary feet whirled up the dust as they dragged them across the road.

"Why has this happened?" Lacoste asked in a faint voice when they reached Jeremiah.

"It is the wisdom of God," Jeremiah replied smilingly.

"And the fields will be clean of them?"

Jeremiah hesitated the fraction of a second. Then he said, "Yes, the fields will be clean of them."

The two old men looked at each other. They stood numbed, their clothes fluttering in the wind. The canvas of the tent thumped as though

beating time for the valley of Gnadenau. In the distance children's gay voices struck up an ancient Mennonite song.

At last Lacoste shrugged his shoulders and Hilpert sighed. Hesitantly, they began packing their miserable belongings. Jeremiah sat by, watching; his red beard glistened and the smile on his lips was weary and glad at once.

When they came for the box on which he was sitting, he stood up. "Where are you going?" he asked.

Lacoste posted himself in front of Jeremiah and began to shout. "Where are we going?" he bellowed, so loudly that his high-pitched voice broke. "What do you care where we're going? What does it matter to you what happens to two old men who are just dirt to you, two filthy old ragmen? The devil take them. The sooner they go to hell the better. If they break their necks, that shows God's righteousness."

Hilpert laid his hand on Lacoste's shoulder. "It's not worth getting excited about, Lacoste."

"Not worth it? O my God, not worth it! It's worth it to me, to spit it out; I've kept it locked up in me long enough." He pushed his hat back on his head. "You God-damned parson with your saintly smile. You lying, soft-stepping, hypocritical skunk. You're trying to tell us it's the wisdom of God that these fields are clean of locusts. Trying to make us believe that Someone up there planned all this, that it isn't a lousy, stinking accident when the damned things die of plague. I suppose it has sense for the swarms to fall on the land and then God stretches out His foot and tramples them to death before they've finished their work. I suppose He's merciful and kind and has pity for these dirt farmers." He sucked air sharply between his teeth, but when Jeremiah opened his mouth to interrupt, he shouted again. "Shut up!" he roared. "Shut up. There is no God if He lets His locusts die before they do their work. There is no God if millions of locusts can fly hundreds of miles merely to frighten the farmers out of their wits. What's the sense? Why should He play a trick on them? Maybe He's a practical joker who puts tacks on their seats or itching powder in their beds. That's the kind of God He is, I suppose."

He rubbed his hand over his forehead as though he had become suddenly dizzy. Then he shook his head, turned away and went to the little wagon on which they had loaded their belongings. The horse turned its head when it heard him coming, and Hilpert helped him up on the seat.

Jeremiah stood with tilted head, as though listening to some distant sound. But when the wagon wheels began to turn and the sand ground in the wheel ruts, he roused himself in dismay and ran after the men. He caught up to them and clung to the side of the wagon while he told them about the locust eggs. They looked down at him, laughing and

shaking their heads, convinced that he had gone mad. Then they fell into a fury because they thought he was trying to make fools of them. Hilpert slashed at the horse with the whip so that it leaped in fright and began trotting. Jeremiah clung fast to the seat and, half running, half dragged along, continued talking to the two old men.

At last his breath gave out and he let go of the wagon. He stumbled on a few steps, then sat down breathless at the side of the road. He wiped his sweating face and followed the wagon with his eyes as it disappeared around a turn in the road. Then he shook his head and smiled.

He knew that the Lord had meant it so.

A long silence succeeded Albert Parker's curse after he learned that the locusts were laying eggs. Man and wife stood with lowered heads among the cornstalks, unconsciously waiting for the lightnings of heaven to strike them.

When nothing happened, Parker laughed and stalked to the house. He pulled boxes and trunks out of their corners and wiped the lids with a rag. Then he moved the table aside to make room for the packing, placed the chairs one on top of the other, and opened the closets.

"What are you doing?" Patricia asked when she entered.

"I'm packing," Albert growled.

"Why?"

"Because I'm leaving for my vacation."

"Albert."

"Because I want to see the country. Wealthy Kansas farmer goes travelling, you know."

Patricia kicked over the chair that Albert had set upon the other and sat down on the lower one. She propped her elbows on her thighs and hid her head in her hands.

"A good idea," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"How is the Kansas farmer going to travel?"

At the moment Parker was taking pots and pans from the shelf that he had built over the stove.

"In style," he mocked. "A horse on one side and a cow on the other. Fifteen miles a day so that the cow will have a few quarts in her bag at night and the horse won't break down or lose a shoe."

"The horse?" Patricia asked, with astonishment in her voice. "Did you say the horse, Albert?"

Parker dropped the pots with a clatter on the stove.

"Certainly the horse," he said. "Or do you think we'll leave it here?"

"No," Patricia replied, without raising her head. "But I think we ought to give it back to its owner. We were given it so that we could keep this land, not for a pleasure trip. Don't you think so, Albert?"

Parker picked up the pots and arranged them in a box. "My God, how noble," he laughed. "I guess your father must have been a bishop. And you've just come out of the convent, Patricia Coroni. What do you think Borden would say if he heard you?"

Patricia dropped her arms and clasped her hands around her knees. "My husband likes to remember my past, does he?" she said scornfully. "My husband recalls that a woman who was a whore doesn't have the right to be honest. How clever you are. Did I ever tell you, by the way, about the Chinese sailor I slept with in Frisco? No? How could I have forgotten to tell you? How silly of me."

He tried to interrupt her. "Shut up!" she shouted at him. "You'll listen to what I have to say!"

Albert squatted motionless by the chest, and remained there as long as she spoke.

"Well, my Chinaman was a little fellow with a silken skin and muscles like iron. He came off a schooner, but he was really a farmer. He wanted to save money to buy a little land, and of course whenever he came to me I took all his savings, so he had no chance to do it. I cleaned him out again and again, so clean you couldn't have found a cent on him. Then I'd usually let him stay with me a few days for nothing. That did me good, because it made me feel human. The last time, before he left me, he borrowed money from me. He wanted to buy just a tiny piece of land, he said, and he'd pay the money back with interest. Well, I had some extra at the time and I felt soft-hearted, so I gave it to him. 'Buy yourself your field,' I said, 'and when you eat the first rice from it, think of me.' I kept him with me all the rest of the day, and then he sailed off and I never saw him again. Sometimes I was down to my last cent myself, and lots of times I hoped my Chinaman would choke on his rice if he didn't pay back my money. Well, one day another Chinaman came into the saloon where I was working and gave me the money. His English was bad, but I finally got the story out of him. My Chinaman had died of some disease in Hong Kong. They found him dead under a bridge; he hadn't gone to a hospital because he had no money. So it was very curious to find a purse full of money under his shirt; then they read a note attached to it. He'd written a curse on anyone who found the money and didn't give it back to me."

She looked at her husband with raised eyebrows. "Now you can talk, Albert, if you have the guts," she said. When Albert remained silent, she stood up, went to the door and crossed the sunlit yard, smiling slyly. She opened the knots in the line that held the horse and took it by the reins.

"Come, boy," she said, drawing the animal slowly around. With nodding head, the horse followed her.

When she passed the door, Parker stepped out.

"Are you going?" he called.

She nodded without pausing. He would follow her. Why should she ask him to, and diminish his satisfaction in thinking of it for himself? She walked leisurely down the dusty road. When Parker caught up to her, she handed him the reins without a word.

She was pleased with herself. She was leading Albert to the Mennonites, and he had not realized it. What did it matter about returning a gift horse? And the story of the Chinaman hadn't happened that way either. But the Holy Virgin of Padua would forgive her the lie; it was in a good cause.

She walked along behind Albert and the horse, thinking that all would be well if he spoke to the Mennonites. Men weakened when they were alone too long. A man without men is like a pine tree without a forest, her father had once said. She smiled, thinking of him and of how much he had given his children to take into life.

When they passed the Biebers' and found the farm deserted, Patricia was frightened. It came forcibly to her that terror hung over all this land, and her own fear mounted as they descended into the valley. When Patricia saw the first houses of the village in the distance, her heart began to pound so fiercely that she had to sit down by the road to rest.

Parker stopped and looked down at her.

"Don't you feel well?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid, Albert," she whispered. "I'm so frightened."

Parker gave a huge laugh and stroked her hair. A few minutes later they went on. They walked with eyes fixed on the houses of the village; although dusk was already falling and the women should have been cooking supper, the air was clear and no smoke drifted over the chimneys, nor was there light in any of the windows. The road was deserted and the silence extended from the earth into the sky.

It had been a bad day for the Mennonites. It had begun with the fog and cold weather that had made everyone irritable. When the sun came out at last, the children had vanished and the families had gone to the fields without them. Then Miller had appeared and related that the children were running around with a man who was probably a swindler; he added angrily that the women would do better to watch their kids instead of talking and gossiping and wasting their time.

When he had finished his lecture, Lydia spoke. "I'm not a mother and I probably ought to keep still," she said, "but if you ask me——"

"No one asks you," Miller said rudely.

"Why not let her talk?" Defries cried. "She's one of us, isn't she?"

Most of the others nodded.

"That's right, let her talk," old Mrs. Kettler called from the other

end of the field. "The young ones ought to have their chance. All the world's good sense doesn't belong to us alone."

Lydia felt everyone looking at her. Her father alone had irascibly lowered his eyes. Her mother had gone to his side and laid her hand on his arm, as though to calm him and tell him that she was standing by him; that she belonged to his side, not to her daughter's.

"I don't want anyone to think I have anything important or specially true to say," she stammered. "And this isn't a conference or anything like that—just a talk, and anyone can say what he thinks when people are talking. I think there's something different about the man with the red beard. He speaks like one of the illuminated, if you know what I mean. And the man is ill. Someone ought to take care of him; someone who isn't so clever that he's become uncharitable."

She had not meant to say much, and when she finished she was frightened at her own audacity.

"Why don't you yourself take care of him?" old Reimer asked.

"Because everyone in the village would say, something must be the matter with him if Lydia Miller takes his part. None of you would believe my testimony. You would shrug and say, it's probably just as true as the Parker business. Or, she's fallen for him. Or else, he's paying her."

Lydia bowed her head. She felt her heart pounding heavily. She seemed to be listening to the echo of her own words; and she clamped her hand tighter around the handle of the pot she held to reassure herself that she was not dreaming. No, she was not; she was standing in the midst of her people on this wheatfield and saying terrible things that burst out of her without her intending to say them.

"You have no right to wash your dirty linen before the whole community," her mother said suddenly.

Lydia raised her head and looked at Caroline. Her mother was still standing at her father's side, with her hand on his arm. But her eyes seemed utterly changed by sorrow; her face had suddenly become wizened and helpless; her hair was thin and there were many grey strands; her breasts were flat and she seemed stooped from heavy work.

"If I were in Lydia's place I would have kept quiet," she went on. "I would have remembered that I'd already befouled my own nest badly enough. And I would not have raised my voice against my own father, or said he was uncharitable; or behaved as though I had been wronged. But she's right, who will believe her? Who will give a cent for anything she says? I'm her mother, and I am ashamed of her. I humbly ask the community to pardon me for what my daughter has done to it. And I humbly ask my own husband to pardon me for this child I have borne him, for I am ashamed of her to the bottom of my heart."

Caroline dropped her hand from her husband's arm and bent down

for the pot lid, which lay on the ground in front of her. She groaned, as though her joints were stiff with cold, and when she was erect again she brushed a strand of hair from her forehead with the back of her hand. "What a shame," she said, "what a miserable shame."

Lydia walked off to the edge of the field. The rest of the farmers followed her with their eyes. When she came to the rim, where they had once burned Patricia Parker's wagon, she turned. She was pale, but her face was so quiet and friendly that all wondered and most of them thought she could not be quite sane. She looked at them all, one after the other, and opened her mouth to speak. But every word that occurred to her seemed false or stupid or arrogant or empty. No words expressed her feeling, which was something like the tangy sweetness that is in the air in spring when the first warm rain thaws out the land.

Finally she lowered her eyes and discovered the dead locusts. She squatted on her heels to look closely at them. The Mennonites craned their necks, and Schermer and a few others began running toward her thinking there was something wrong. Long before they reached her, she stood up. She stretched out her arms as though gesturing for silence. Her face was smiling happily; the running men stopped short and the others listened with bated breath.

"They're dying!" she cried, and the words seemed to her the best she could have said. "It's true, they're dying."

No more than a few minutes passed before someone discovered that the locusts were laying eggs before they died. They were depositing tiny parcels of slime in the ground which would remain there until spring, and then hatch into locusts. No longer would the settlers live in fear of swarms that might come every seven years, or perhaps never again. They would have the locusts in their own land; they would be raising their crops, and year after year the insects would devour the harvest, lay eggs and die, until one day the wanderlust would come over them again, and they would move on toward the east. Then a new swarm would drive in from the west, and the tale would begin at the beginning.

For a long while the Mennonites said nothing. The families were standing together, the men staring blankly and the women standing at their sides and pretending not to notice their twisted expressions.

Then the children arrived. They appeared suddenly, each joining his own family, and stood as though they had been there all along. They were panting from their run up the hill, and it was hard for them to remain still and small. Now and then one child was forced to cough. When the others saw that they evoked no unfavourable attention, they all began clearing their throats and glancing surreptitiously at one another.

Lydia had sat down on the ground. No one paid attention to her,

because each stood lost in his own helpless thoughts until Miller began to speak.

"There must be some means for destroying the brood in the ground," he said. "We will ask the company to send someone who knows. Meanwhile, we will harvest the potatoes and the wheat we have saved, gather our provisions in a common storehouse, and pull through until next year."

He spoke as dryly and soberly as he always did, as though their very lives were not threatened.

"We will have to slaughter some of the cattle," he went on. "And we will not be able to raise any calves. The hens will probably have to be sacrificed too, but our Lord in heaven, who is great and just, will help us. Each man has to bear only what he can; God distributes his burdens according to the strength of His servants."

When he concluded, the others were silent for a while. Then they all began talking at once. They were worn out, they declared. The land had been selected by a committee and bought with the settlers' own good money. No one had told them this was locust land. The people must have known. Or had the committee forgotten to ask? Had they simply taken it without examining it? Had the committee travelled around for weeks just to find locust land to settle on? Or had the railroad cheated them?

No, Brother Miller, we're not staying here. God knows, we did all that could be done, as long as there was any sense in it. But too much is too much. We have wives and children and we want our money back or other land. We don't want to be cheated by scoundrels. God knows, we didn't find our money in the street, and we can't throw it away as though we did. We scraped it out of the ground with our fingernails, and our grandfathers did the same before us; we spent nothing and allowed ourselves no luxuries; we always kept our belts in and the reins short. We walked when others rode, and we drank water when they swilled vodka. Our women spun their own cloth and sewed their own clothes; they even made their own buttons so that we could save. That was so, wasn't it? Has Brother Miller forgotten how we wanted to save the few kopecks that would go for bone buttons? Has Brother Miller forgotten how the people laughed at us when we came to the city with our cloth buttons; how they made fun of us because we held on to our money? And why did we hold on to our money? To buy locust-ridden land? It's enough to make one blush before one's wife and children. The Mennonites come from the Crimea to America and settle on locust land. The Mennonites bring their money that was so hard-earned so that a railroad company can cheat their committee. Land no one else would take was palmed off on them; land that was diseased through and through they had taken under the plough.

For a while all were elevated by their righteous anger. Of course Brother Miller was not to blame—nobody was saying that. He hadn't

had anything to do with the committee; he had fallen into the trap just as much as they had. But he was their leader now, and the office carried the responsibility. No, no, they weren't staying here. They wouldn't wait until it was too late. They wouldn't be taken in again. "Hold out," the railroad gentlemen would say to them, "just hold out one year. Next year's harvest will make it all up. Next year you'll own your own threshing machine. Your cattle will be so fat you will have to widen the barn doors. You'll be so rich you can take the railroad to town, if you like." No, we won't hold out; we've been cheated. We want our rights. Just our rights, that's all. Even in Russia we got our rights when we fought for them; why should it be any different in America? Because we bought this land of our own free will? Because we signed a contract, and the railroad isn't responsible for our mistakes? What kind of answer is that? It's plain robbery, that's all it is . . .

Gradually their voices became lower and they began talking with their wives. So this was what Kansas was like. It was true the soil was marvellous and had yielded easily to the plough, and everything had grown fast. It was good soil, deep and fertile, well-drained with just the right proportion of sand and loam. But what use was it when locusts infested it? What could you do with fields that were no more than a monstrous breeding ground? No, no, there was no time to lose. They would grow accustomed to some other place; they would build a house elsewhere, and a barn, and dig a well; it would be sunny and windy, and there would be a brook, just as there was here. There was no sense hanging on to what you had built up here. After all, you hadn't really taken root here yet; the floor of your house was not even trodden firm. Who would weep for such a place? How could you say, this is our house and our garden, when you had not yet buried one of your dead here, and when no couple had been wedded in Gnadenau?

But the women remained sorrowful. The men turned away from them and began debating among themselves again. Miller stood among them saying little more than yes and no. His mouth was a tight line and his face hard and taciturn. Lydia was still sitting on the ground, with Carrot beside her; now and then the girl and the child glanced at each other and nodded. Mrs. Kettler stood aside with the other women, her arms folded, listening with one ear to the women's conversation and with the other to what the men were saying. Old Reimer sat in the grass beside his wife, whispering to her and glancing with a sagacious smile at the group standing around Miller.

Late in the afternoon the settlers remembered that they had still to bury the stranger, and they began returning to the valley. Halfway down a few of them went to the small potato patch that Schermer had planted on a bulge of the hill. They pushed aside a heap of locusts and began digging. They dug around under the first plant, and from the first they

went to a second, then to a third. Under the fourth plant they found a single potato.

Then they knew that the locusts of God had done their work unto the last.

Schermer had finished the coffin for Agnes Brown. It was a simple box of planed wood, the only ornament being the grain of the wood itself. Inside it had been lined with linen. Holes were already bored in the cover for the screws, and the screws themselves lay wrapped in a twist of paper on the bottom of the coffin.

After tending to his chores, Schermer loaded the coffin on the hay wagon and hitched up his horse. In the coffin he placed the ropes that would be needed for lowering it into the ground, and put the screw-driver in his pocket. From the barn he fetched a horse blanket and spread it over the coffin. The blanket had once been dark blue, but rain and sweat had darkened it until it was almost black, so that it appeared to be a solemn drape on the coffin, in spite of the yellow band along the border.

The village was deserted except for the cats, sitting in the sun, and the hens industriously moving in the shade of the houses. The wagon rattled along and the coffin slipped from one side to the other. Sometimes the wind puffed up the blanket so that it swelled like a round belly; but most of the time only the dangling, yellow-striped corners rocked in the wind. When he came to a stone in the road, Schermer held the reins in one hand and gripped the box with the other, so that it would not slide forward or backward. When he arrived at Miller's house, he turned into the yard.

"Whoa," he said, drawing back on the reins.

The horse halted and Schermer tied the reins to the wagon. He straightened out the blanket, so that it would look graver, and removed his hat. Then he looked around. The house seemed as deserted as all the others. The front door was open, but the door to the death chamber was closed and a black cat was crouched on the threshold. The barn door was ajar and groaning with every puff of wind. When the wind paused for a moment, Schermer heard the animals stirring in their stalls. A rope hanging from a pulley swung back and forth like a bell, and the handle of an empty tin pail rattled softly.

Something moved in the room. Schermer started.

"Anyone home?" he asked.

There was no answer. Schermer put on his hat and went in.

"Anyone home?" he asked again, as he stepped over the threshold.

"I'll say there is."

The voice was hoarse and drunken; at first Schermer could not think who it might be. Then he understood.

"Mr. Brown," he said, going into the parlour.

"Yes, Mr. Brown," Johnny repeated after him. "Mr. Johnniy Brown, if you don't mind."

He was slumped in Miller's seat at the head of the table, his legs stretched out under the table and showing from the other end. Between his big hands he held an almost empty bottle; his cheeks were red and his eyes swollen, and the sweat gleamed on his nose and forehead like a thick layer of fat.

"How are you, Mr. Brown?" Schermer asked, thinking of the dead woman in the house and the coffin in the yard.

"How am I?" Johnny asked droolingly. "Lousy. Stinking, if you must know. Your God's hit me square between the eyes. Square between the eyes." He set the bottle to his mouth, tipped his head back and took a long drink. "He figured out how he could hit Johnny Brown worst, that's what he did. Figured out where to kick me when I was down. And then he thought of Agnes. Agnes Andersen, who was so frail and weak and different. You didn't know her, mister, and I can't describe her to you. She was a teacher in Cheyenne and she married me. Me, and she had a million to choose from. You know how I felt after the wedding?"

He lifted his hand and gestured wearily. "*Merde*, how do I know how I felt? Bigger than a guy that's found a nugget the size of his fist. Big as a buffalo, maybe." Again he drank. "Then came this God-damned trip. As you like, darling, I said, and we'll go wherever you please. That was when your God rolled up His sleeve and smacked me in the puss." He belched and groaned. "It wasn't bad till Denver, and if she'd gone to a doctor there she might be alive to-day. But she didn't go to a doctor; instead she said she wanted to stay near Jeremiah Kentrup. *Merde*, I thought; but I said yes because I couldn't say no to her. But I made up my mind to pay back Kentrup the first chance I got. I'll chop him to pieces, I thought; I'll hang him by his beard; I'll . . . And I didn't touch a hair on his head." Tears began running down his cheeks. "I didn't touch him. At night I lay beside him when he slept; in the morning I washed in the river with him; in the afternoon I rode over the narrow bridges beside him; and in the evenings along cliffs overhanging valleys; and the devil take me if I didn't think of killing him every time. I swore to do it a hundred times. And God-damned son of a bitch that I am, I didn't touch him."

Johnny was sobbing like a child now. "What a miserable stinker I am," he said plaintively. "I could spit in my own face. Why don't you spit in my face, brother?" He looked at Schermer with glazed eyes, then raised the bottle and emptied it. He tossed the empty bottle into a corner of the room and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. Then he tried to stand up.

"I must go in to her again," he said. "I can't leave her alone all

day. I can't sit around here drinking while she lies dead in there."

Again he tried to get up. Schermer stood watching, without offering to help. What a swine, he thought, to let himself go like that and wallow in filth.

Johnny drew up his legs and pushed against the seat of the chair. He propped his hands on the tabletop, thrust his arms out to the side and threw the weight of his body forward. But his elbows could not support the burden; they yielded and his face fell flat on the table. He lay there with closed eyes.

Schermer watched. It was better to keep your hands off such swine lest you befoul yourself. How ridiculous it was to make a good, sound coffin of good, seasoned Mennonite wood for a creature like this. Ridiculous and a waste of time.

Johnny began to snore. Schermer went to the door. He sat down on the threshold, folded his arms around his knees and waited. Now and then he looked at the door behind which the dead woman lay, and then at the coffin under the dark horse blanket. He rubbed his strong, bare biceps complacently. It was good to be healthy and alive. Sooner or later the locusts would pass. But death—death would remain.

He put his hand in his pocket and took out a thick slice of dark bread. It was warm from the warmth of his body, and already slightly stale on the surface because he had carried it around all day. He opened his mouth, bit into the bread, and began chewing comfortably.

When Schermer heard a wagon coming, he got up and crossed the yard. He walked with hands in his pockets and dragging his feet, as farmers do when they approach something whose nature is dubious. There is curiosity in that shuffle, but there is also a consciousness of one's own dignity.

From the upper end of the village a covered wagon was coming down the road. The brakes were on and the right rear wheel was dragging along the ground. The horses were going at a slow trot, the shaft between them swinging back and forth with the irregularities of the wheel ruts. The dust from hoofs and wheels hovered over the fields, and the noise filled the whole of the silent valley.

A woman sat on the box. As she was passing Schermer, she drew rein.

"Hey, there!" she called out, leaning forward.

"What?" Schermer asked, standing still.

"Is this a village?"

"Yes, this is a village. Gnadenau, if you don't mind."

The woman said something to someone inside the wagon. Then she turned to Schermer again. "Do you have anything like a hotel here?" she asked.

Schermer shook his head. "I think you'll have to go to Topeka for that."

"Jesus, what a neighbourhood." The woman swatted a fly that had settled on her knee. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Why isn't there a living soul in the whole village?"

"They're in the fields."

"Don't you have locusts here?"

Schermer laughed; he scratched the back of his neck. "Don't we have locusts? That's good," he growled. "I'll sell you two bushels for a penny."

"No, thanks. I have all I need."

She looked around the village.

"Aren't they dying here too?" she asked. Then she discovered the coffin on the hay wagon. "What's that?"

"A coffin."

"Oh."

"A woman died. A stranger named Agnes Brown. Two men brought her here last night. One's her husband; he's inside, lying drunk on the table; and the other isn't quite right in the head."

"A man with a red beard?"

"Uh-huh."

"Sort of hunched?"

"A little, I think."

"A preacher, or something like that?"

Schermer nodded. "Yes, I guess that's him," he said. Then he recalled something that had been troubling him all along.

"What did you mean by your question about the locusts dying?" he inquired.

The woman tied the reins and turned to the person inside the wagon. "I think we'll stay for the funeral, Homer," she said. "It isn't good to behave as if the death of another human being doesn't concern you."

The man inside growled something that Schermer could not understand.

The woman shrugged. "Then I'm crazy," she replied. "But I'd feel lousy if I didn't stay while they bury the poor creature. God knows how many hundreds of miles she is from home, and her husband lying drunk inside."

She clambered down, paying no more attention to what the man inside was saying.

When she was standing on the ground, she stretched, for she was stiff from having ridden the whole way with her legs drawn up against the seat. Then she told Schermer that her name was Betty Maxwell, that she and her husband were on their way to the next town, and that the locusts were dying, but laying eggs in the ground before they died. "The eggs will be locusts next year," she said, "which means that this land is no good for farming from now until Doomsday."

Schermer had listened silently. He tilted his head back and spat.

"God's trees do not grow into the sky," he said, "nor do all the fruits of the devil ripen." But he felt uneasy and wished the others would come; they should have been here long ago if what the woman was saying was true. There'd be no point rattling pot lids if the land was lost; there'd be nothing to do but go and hire themselves out.

"Where is the husband?" Betty asked.

"In the house."

"Would it be all right if I spoke to him?"

"I think he's asleep."

They sat down together on the doorstep. The wind had slackened; downy banners of cloud floated leisurely across the sky. The barn door had stopped groaning on its hinges and the block and tackle hung motionless. From the fields came the sweetish odour of rotting locusts.

After a while they dozed. They were startled by a "whoa." Twilight was nearing; the shadow of the well pump stretched a great length over the warm brown earth.

Heinrich Bieber had drawn up short because the Maxwells' wagon blocked his way. He stood beside his two oxen, holding his hat in one hand and wiping the sweatband with his big red handkerchief.

Betty braced herself against Schermer's shoulder and got up. Broad-shouldered and powerful, she crossed the yard.

Bieber had recognized her from a distance, as had Clara, who sat under the roof of the wagon with the baby on her lap. So they had caught up to those damned Maxwells.

"Well, Heinrich Bieber," Betty said. She stood squarely on the road, a few yards away from him.

Bieber did not look at her. "Get your wagon out of the way," he growled. "The road is for all, I think. Or is it only for the rich?"

"Easy, easy," Betty said.

She went up to the wagon and leaned in.

"Well, the whole kit and kaboodle," she said when she recognized Clara and the baby in the semi-darkness. She shook her head.

"Are you quitting?" she asked.

At that moment they heard the tramp of the Mennonites' heavy boots on the road. When they turned they saw the men, women and children coming slowly through the village. They were walking in small groups, with the soft evening light in their faces. The children were carrying the pots and pans, and the fading sun glanced off the copper covers and bottoms. Now and then two pot lids knocked together; then the metal rang out like a distant bell.

No one was talking. Many of the women held their hands clasped, as though praying; others were carrying sleeping children. All walked with bowed heads, looking neither to right nor to left, as though each had been abandoned and was alone in this vast land of Kansas. The closer they

came the more distinctly the waiting group felt the aura of hopeless sorrow that enveloped them. It hovered over their bowed shoulders, tangible as a banner above a procession.

Miller was the first to enter the yard, but the others came right at his heels. They paid no attention to the wagons; they remained in small isolated groups, as they had come. A few of the women went into the death chamber to prepare the body, and the men drew the dark blanket from the coffin, lifted the box off the hay wagon and placed it on the ground. It looked sad and small in the big yard; the cover lay diagonally across it, so that the people could see the coarse linen with which it was lined.

Schermer heard from Defries how things stood. When Defries finished his narration, Schermer went over to his parents to console them. They were standing a little aside; when he came they smiled, and it was not necessary for him to say anything.

Everywhere, now, the people had begun to talk in low tones. They discussed the coffin and the wood it was made of, and the last funeral they had had, when they were in the midst of their preparations for departure. Yes, that had been a solemn funeral. It was their real farewell. Then, for the first time, many had understood clearly what it meant to go to America. It meant leaving the dead behind, losing them once again, parting from them once and for all and not knowing what would become of them. They, the settlers, could take care of themselves, but God must care for the little cemetery at the other end of Friedenau; all they could do for it was to pray.

Schermer had taken Miller aside.

"Tell your women not to go into the parlour," he said. "This fellow Brown is drunk; he's slumped across the table sleeping. I think we ought to wake him. Seems like a poor devil, from what I could understand of his blabber."

"Where is he lying, did you say?" Miller asked.

"In the parlour." Schermer shrugged. "I don't think it matters if he sits on your chair, Brother Miller; his head on your table won't do any harm, nor his feet on your floor." Schermer stopped abruptly, wondering what had changed his mind about Brown since the afternoon. Perhaps it was because these little things were not so important now; you understood others' misfortunes better when you were faced with your own.

The women came out of the death chamber. They had dressed Agnes in one of Lydia's old nightgowns. Two boys took up the coffin. The one at the head walked backwards, twisting his head around so that he could see where he was going.

The conversations died down; everyone made way and watched the course of the coffin. It was small, no bigger than a child's coffin. She must have been half a child, this Agnes Brown. Some of the people

glanced shyly into the death chamber, which was so narrow that the bed stood almost against the door. Under a sheet lay the dead woman, whose face none of them had ever seen; whom none knew anything about, and whom they were nevertheless burying as though she had always belonged to the community.

The men had to tilt the coffin on end to get it into the room. They put it down on the floor beside the bed. Then they closed the door.

"Come along," Miller said to Schermer. "We'll wake the fellow."

At the lower end of the valley the sun had disappeared below the hills. The people in the yard had resumed their conversations. Their shadows had dissolved into the darkening ground. A breath of the night's dampness was in the air, but it would remain light for a while yet in the valley and in the sky, though in the small-windowed rooms lights would be necessary. One knew these things, as though one had always been here. One was not yet rooted in this land, but still one was heavy-footed and moved reluctantly; one's lungs had breathed deeply of this air and had absorbed the smells of the land into the blood. It was easy to say that one wanted other land or one's money back; but it hurt to think of going.

Miller and Schermer paced solemnly through the crowd. Before they reached the house, Schermer felt someone's hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw the man who had wanted to pass Betty Maxwell's wagon just as the others arrived.

"My name is Heinrich Bieber," the man said hoarsely. "I'm a farmer from up there." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I mean, I was a farmer."

Miller and Schermer replied politely with their names.

"Pleased to meet you," Bieber replied automatically. "Is there anyone here you might call the sheriff?"

Miller and Schermer glanced at each other in slight alarm.

"I'll tell you why," Bieber went on in a hurried, somewhat mindless manner. "That Maxwell woman is here. You know her——" He turned to Schermer. "She was sitting on the doorstep with you when we came. She's the wife of a moneylender. Land as security and two per cent. interest a month. Finally, I agreed to it, but by then the locusts had started laying eggs and the Maxwells said no." Between sentences Bieber glanced repeatedly at his wagon. "Well, I quit the whole thing. I've got a wife and child. For more than two years I struggled through, with holes in the roof, up in the dark and finished after dark, no help and no doctor and not a bite of meat for months—you know how it is."

He turned and looked up toward the hill, beyond which his house lay. He had locked the doors and put the keys in his pocket; he could feel them there, weighing against his leg. There was no lock on the barn door, and so he had nailed it shut. He had left the windows in place, although they had cost money and could be used again. But his wife

had not wanted the rain and snow to come into the room and ruin everything that had once been her home.

"Well?" Miller asked impatiently.

"Excuse me," Bieber said. "All day long I keep getting these fits of brooding."

He spoke in a harsh, loud voice; most of the people in the yard had heard his speech and fallen silent.

"So I said to myself, I can't eat locust eggs," he went on. "And from locust eggs come locusts. I said, 'This is the end,' and I quarrelled with my wife because she said, 'Maybe God will let the eggs freeze in the ground.' As if there was any sense in that. Anyone who understands God's ways couldn't talk like that. Where eggs are laid, they hatch, and where locust eggs hatch there's no place for a farmer." Again he turned his head toward the wagon, his eyes restive and anxious. He removed his hat, so that the fading light fell on a sweat-stained, unshaven face.

"Therefore I came here," he went on, twisting his hat in his hands. "I came here because I want to go on to Topeka to talk with the railroad company. Maybe they'll understand that a farmer can't live on locust land and that nothing but a hole in the ground comes after the last hole in your belt. And now this Maxwell woman won't let me go on. Anyone can ride or stop on this road, she says, and it won't hurt me to lose an hour or two to honour the dead. She says there'll always be time for the railroad company, but little time for an act of piety. I don't want to make any trouble for you here, but . . ."

Just then all the people removed their hats. The door to the death chamber had opened and the men were carrying out the coffin. They bore it to Schermer's hay wagon, which was still standing where he had left it earlier in the afternoon.

"Please excuse me," Miller whispered suddenly. He had recalled that Brown was probably still asleep; they could not bury the woman with her husband not present. He went over to the house. Through the open door he could see the man's legs under the table. He shook his head. Things had come to a pretty pass with him. Once it began, there was no stopping it. It was like a ball of yarn that started to unroll and went on until the last thread came off the spool. Well, why not? Why shouldn't a drunken wretch sit at his table when he could not even control his own family? Was there anything unusual about it, that his heart should pound and his face flush? He had better get used to the idea that from now on he belonged to this kind; a poor devil with no money in his pocket and no land under his feet. Everything they'd lived for was going to pieces.

For a moment he saw Lydia standing motionless at a window and looking up at the sky. Then he was in the room, where the stranger still slept. Schermer followed him, and behind Schermer came Caroline,

who had stood in the yard all the while with her eyes fixed on her husband.

Miller touched the sleeping man's shoulder.

"Hey, there," he said.

Johnny did not stir. His head lay with one cheek on the table, and saliva had trickled from his mouth on to the tabletop. He was breathing heavily. The room smelled of whisky.

Schermer grasped his shoulders and straightened him. His head dangled, but he opened his eyes slightly and babbled something incomprehensible. Then he ran his tongue over his mouth, smacked his lips and fell asleep again.

"Get me water," Miller said to Caroline. "A pailful."

Caroline went to the kitchen. Meanwhile Miller pushed the table aside. No sense wetting the wood. It was dark in the room; outside in the yard there was silence, and the whole scene seemed to him like a bad dream.

When Caroline returned with the water, Miller poured it over the sleeping man's head. Johnny jerked convulsively; he began to puff and flail about him with his arms. But Schermer held him in an iron grip until the last drop of water had been drained from the pail. "So, brother," he said, when Miller set down the empty pail. "That ought to bring you to your senses."

Johnny staggered to his feet and stumbled over to the wall.

"You God-damned swine," he roared, "I'll pay you back for that. I'll break your square heads for you." He lowered his head and reeled toward Miller. "You son of a bitch," he growled thickly, "you son of a bitch, you son of a bitch." The words degenerated into a gurgling sound.

Then he raised his arms. They were long arms, with cords of muscle at the biceps. With crooked fingers, like some monster ape's, his hands hung poised over Miller's narrow shoulders, then closed on them.

Miller stood without moving. He had seen the drunken man approaching him and had wondered why he felt no fear. He stood with compressed lips and raised eyebrows, his face impassive and haughty. His only emotion had been disgust at the man's open mouth and the thick red tongue, which projected somewhat beyond the lower lip. When the hands came down on him and the fingers bored like claws into his shoulders, he realized fully what strength it took for a man not to resist. How poor was the man whom God's light did not lead.

"You are sinning, brother," he said evenly. Then it was over; the man lay on the floor twisting in pain and Schermer was rubbing the fist he had driven into Johnny's stomach.

Caroline had begun to scream. The others poured in from outside. Miller stood, pale and immobile, in the middle of the room, gazing with half-shut eyes at the stranger, who lay groaning on the floor and finally

vomited. Then he rolled over on his side. After a while he sat up. "We want to bury your wife, brother," Miller said, his lips scarcely moving.

Johnny stared at Miller with open mouth. Then he stared at Schermer, and at the others in the room, each in turn. At the end of the circle stood Caroline. For a long while he stared at her. He turned his eyes from Caroline to the floor, to the ceiling, to his own hands, and then again to Martin Miller.

"What did you say?" he whispered.

"It is getting dark, night is falling, brother. We want to bury your wife, brother."

There was profound pity in his voice.

When they came out into the yard, they saw that nightfall was near. The ribbons of the sky were streaked with red, and garlanded from hill to hill. It was like the light that penetrates the nave from the rose of a great cathedral, casting over all the people a pale-violet solemnity.

The coffin had been placed once more on the hay wagon and covered with the dark, yellow-edged blanket. The ropes were tied tightly across it, to hold the coffin in place.

Miller walked first, holding in his hand the Mennonite prayer book. He walked to the wagon through the gap the farmers had left for him and the dead woman's husband.

Johnny could not walk alone; Schermer went at his side, holding his arm. The widower staggered at every step, mumbling softly and wagging his head. None of the farmers looked at him; none knew what he felt and none sympathized with him.

Defries went to the wagon, untied the reins and softly clicked to the horse. They began to move across the yard in a wide arc, reaching the road just back of the Maxwells' wagon.

Betty stood waiting, studying the Mennonites. They walked with their square heads lowered, looking neither to right nor to left. They were round-shouldered; their arms were crooked outward and their trousers baggy. Their tread was heavy and deliberate, and their hands swung lightly back and forth as they moved. Two by two they walked, and each pair was like the other; and the smell of their sweat-stained clothes was all the same.

And the women were like the men. Except that they wore skirts; that each had breasts and a broad pelvis, a lighter complexion and freckles, a smaller head and narrower shoulders. The difference lay only in their sex.

And she herself, Betty Maxwell, was like these people. As in a mirror she saw herself, with her big feet, her strong arms and her heavy breasts. It was as though she ran her hand over her own body, feeling her skin,

the warmth of her flesh, the curve of her hips. She belonged to these people who were marching past her in the twilight, smelling of sweat and earth. She thought of George. If they had not hanged him in Arkansas, everything might have been different. Perhaps one day she would have gone off with him and become a woman like these women. She might have planted tomatoes and milked cows and had children.

She spat. It was a shame to think of such things at a funeral. The farmers were past now; if she wanted to reach the grave in time she would have to hurry. She began running; she did not look back and so she did not see that Bieber and his family also were following the procession; and that Albert and Patricia had arrived at Miller's house, spoken with Homer Maxwell for a while, and then also followed behind Agnes Brown's coffin—the last in the long line. Betty was sunk in thought; she stared at the ground and paid no attention to anything.

None of the Mennonites turned around, nor did they look at one another. They walked in silence along the ruts, into which the wind had swept dead locusts; each man was alone with his thoughts of the past and the future.

Schermer had put his arm around Johnny, the better to hold him. The drunken man leaned massively against him, and Schermer could not escape his disgusting breath. It seemed to him they had been walking for hours, and the weight he was dragging grew heavier with every step. Perhaps they had gone astray and missed the spot where two of the men had dug a grave that afternoon. Either the grave was somewhere else, or the two gravediggers had fallen asleep and everyone had walked past them in the darkness.

They had long since passed beyond the fields; the smells now were the smells of the prairie. In the semi-darkness the stunted bushes and trees looked like coagulated smoke. The wind had freshened; it hissed and crackled in all the dry leaves and twigs. The wheel ruts had flattened out. Like fat footstools, clumps of grass sprang everywhere; you had to be careful not to trip among the hummocks.

The men were shaking their heads imperceptibly. It would be difficult to eat stranger's bread and to learn to bow down. Your back had become stiff, your skull hard and your feet broad from standing on your own soil. The house and the cow and the wheat had been your own; when the sun shone it had shone upon your fruit, and when it rained it had rained for you. The earth you had crumbled between your fingers had been from your field; the water you drank, from your own well. Your neighbour had belonged to you and you to him; you had grown together since time immemorial. It was easy to say you would hire yourself out, but it was like dying. You would be a farmer without land. Could a farmer exist without land?

How strange it must be. You would see wheat rusting, and you

would not be terrified, for it would not be your own bread. The cow would calve and you would not sit up all night in fear and trembling until it was over. For weeks it would not rain, nor would you be in despair over your crops.

Or would you? Would the stranger's property become meaningful to you; would it fill your heart and make a life for you?

Defries suddenly halted the horse. A shadow had appeared on the prairie. It approached until it was standing on the edge of the road.

"You are very late," the man said.

He was small and stocky, with a broad face and a rounded beard.

Miller nodded and shook hands with him. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"Over there." The man pointed toward the prairie.

"It's right on the edge of our land. I don't think our ploughing will reach there for a long time."

He went up to Defries and helped him untie the knots.

"The man with the beard came over to us, out of nowhere," the gravedigger related. "He helped us. He works like a farmer. Has a fever, but he works like a farmer," he repeated.

"Where is he now?" Defries asked.

"I don't know. When we had finished he went out to the prairie, and after a while we lost sight of him." The man fell silent and busied himself with the knots.

"Queer sort of saint," he said after a while.

"What's that?" Defries asked.

The man did not answer. He shook his head and drew the blanket from the coffin.

"A little thing," he said.

"Not much more than five feet," Schermer volunteered.

The man with the beard turned toward him. "Good evening, Brother Schermer," he said cheerfully. Then he saw Johnny and closed his mouth with a snap.

They took the coffin from the wagon, and two of the men carried it between them over the dark land. The man with the beard held a lantern, so that all could find the way. He moved along as though hovering above the ground. At last he stood still; they had reached the grave. The air was crisp with the smell of upturned earth. Spades and shovels projected blackly out of the heap of earth the men had thrown up. A young birch stood beside the grave, its trunk supple and white in the dim light and its leaves fluttering in the wind.

"Where are the ropes?" asked the man who had waited at the grave.

"Here," Defries said. He laid three coils of rope on the coffin and commenced unwinding a fourth.

A night bird began its sorrowful call. Everyone listened until the sound faded. An ominous silence followed, while the people waited for the sound to begin again. It must have come from close by, where a ridge rose like a dyke out of the prairie.

"A hoot owl," one of the children said. The farmers nodded and forgot the bird.

They had gathered in a semicircle around the grave, the men and women standing separately and the children scattered among them. All were looking at the coffin, whose pale wood seemed to have taken to itself all the remaining light in the sky. It lay, peacefully radiant, on the shovel handles that had been laid diagonally across the grave. There was a space between coffin and ground, so that the men could draw the ropes under it, one at the head and one at the foot.

All shifting of feet and position terminated when Miller began to pray. The men took off their hats and the women clasped their hands. How small and unimportant one was here, before God. Encircling one was the prairie and the night, and here a tiny centre of men. What were one's arms and muscles, one's knowledge of life and the soil? What did it mean to have broken open a patch of land and constructed a few miserable huts? One remained as pitiful as on the day of one's birth.

The women sighed softly. How small she must have been, this woman they were burying. Poor and lonely with her drunken husband, and restless as the Wandering Jew. She would be interred here on the prairie, where none would know of her grave and none would tend it. Would their own fate be any different? Once it had been good to think of dying. There had been the neat little cemetery, with its pruned trees, its wall and well-kept paths. As early as March the sun had been hot along the wall; on Sundays you could sit down on a stone and look at the little mounds, with the air smelling of warmth, dry leaves and of melting snow. The Lord had given and the Lord had taken away; praised be the name of the Lord in all eternity. Amen.

Miller had closed the prayerbook. It had been too dark for him to have read a single line; moreover, he knew all the prayers by heart. But he had held the book open because that was proper; his voice had rung with the full solemnity of the occasion, letting each word sound with all its weight.

The men tightened the ropes, and others drew the shovel handles from under the coffin. Slowly they lowered it into the grave. It grazed along the walls with a scraping sound. Then it rested on the ground; the men on one side released the ropes and those on the other side drew them out.

Schermer piloted Johnny to the open grave. Down below the pale wood still gleamed, and crumbs of earth pattered upon the cover of the coffin.

Johnny raised his hand; the others thought he was going to speak

a blessing. But he merely stood, and after a while, he let his arm sink down and shook his head, as though no words were fitting.

Someone handed him a shovel. With difficulty he filled it three times and let the earth fall on the coffin. Then he stood erect again and gazed down into the grave. Schermer stood by him, holding him firmly.

One after another the men and women went up to the grave and shovelled earth into it. The sound of the thudding earth became steadily lower in pitch, until at last there was only a low knocking, as when a field is being trenched.

When the Mennonites had all done their duty, they handed the shovels to the strangers who had come—to the Biebers and Parkers and to Betty Maxwell. At the last, the man with the red beard appeared out of the darkness.

He took the shovel from Patricia, filled it and let the earth trickle slowly into the grave, as though he did not want to wake the dead. He did it again and again, until the farmers, who had been on the point of going home, hesitated. Gradually their whispered conversations died.

The children came up closer to the grave. They were glad to see the man with the red beard again. They had thought they had lost him forever by leaving him alone all during the day. He could have no knowledge of what had happened.

"The locusts are laying eggs and dying," Carrot said in his high-pitched voice, frightening the owl on the ridge from its doze.

The big bird swooped over their heads and vanished into the darkness. They followed it with their eyes, listening until the beating of its wings mingled with the puffing of the wind. Then they turned their gaze back to Jeremiah, and as they did so they discerned in the sky a strange gleam. They wondered at it, and some took it for a sign of the Lord.

Jeremiah, however, knew it was only the last light of the day. He smiled in gratitude to God, who had sent it.

Then he began to speak.

"The Lord has sent me to you to help you," he said. He set the shovel on the ground, clasped his hands around the handle and leaned his weight on the wood.

"He sent a man to me; it was night in the streets of Denver when the man came. He was a farmer upon whose fields the locusts had come and upon whose heart fear had descended, so that these two drove him from his land. But God made use of him, sending him to me to show me the way.

"Before the Cathedral of St. John in Denver I waited for him, and when he found me he did as he had been commanded, fulfilling the will of the Lord and showing me the way, though he knew not that he did so, nor did he know aught of his mission. But I knew."

"How did you know?" Miller asked mockingly.

"The Lord revealed it to me," Jeremiah replied simply.

"Then He speaks with you as an equal."

"No, but I understand Him without His speaking."

Miller's temper was rising. "You lie," he said. "Shame on you."

He turned to go home. He was sick of all this fuss. The Word of God stood in the Scriptures, from beginning to end, for all time.

"Why should he be lying?" Patricia asked. "Why do you refuse to believe that God speaks with him?"

The farmers strained their eyes to see the speaker. Miller hesitated.

"She's right!" Parker exclaimed loyally. "Why shouldn't God speak to him as He has spoken to others?"

"Is he an outcast because he's poor?" Patricia asked.

"Or because he's not a Mennonite?" Parker added spitefully.

The men growled irritably for a moment, then fell silent. The only sound was the snorting of the horse whose bridle Parker was holding.

"Maybe you're wondering why we're here," Patricia went on. "It doesn't have anything to do with you Mennonites. You see, this man, Jeremiah Kentrup, gave us his horse. It was the only thing he owned; my husband had to kill ours when our barn burned down. Jeremiah Kentrup gave it to us and went away before we could even say thank you. We blessed him for that as we would a saint, if you care to know." Her voice was becoming gradually hoarser. "Then, this morning, we saw the locust eggs and we knew the land was infested, and my husband got sick of it all and decided we would give up the farm. All right, I said, then we would give up the farm. All right, I said, but then we have to give the horse back. We don't need a horse to get to the city, and in the city we wouldn't have any use for it. No one wants an animal in the city, especially not a poor, worn-out old horse." She brushed her hand over her nose. "So here we are, Mr. Kentrup, and here's your horse," she continued, sobbing. "Don't think I'm crying because we have to give the beast back. It's just because I feel so unhappy, that's all."

It was getting cold; the people began to shiver. The men hunched their shoulders, the women folded their arms over their breasts, and the children stood and shivered. But all waited; even Miller did not stir.

"All is good, sister," Jeremiah said. "You will not leave your land, and when the night is past you will awaken and imagine that all this has been a dream."

He lowered his voice, but he spoke so clearly that all could understand.

"It is not important whether you believe me; it matters little whether you think me a liar or a dreamer or an instrument in His hand. Do not think of me, for I am like you, and helpless as you all are. But He who sent me to you is strong, and His power is without limit."

Jeremiah stretched out his hand. "There lie your fields," he went on.

"They are brown and fertile; you can plough as deep as you choose, and still there is rich soil beneath. It smells like sweet cake when the sun warms it, and like forest soil when the rain dampens it. It is strong and virgin, ready for the seed of your sowings. You have wrested it from the prairie, and upon it is God's blessing."

"You're forgetting the locusts, preacher," Betty Maxwell cried, and laughed harshly.

"And the locust eggs. Or are they the seed of our sowing?" Defries mocked.

"No," Jeremiah said, as quietly and pleasantly as ever. "How could I forget them? They are within the earth, billions of them, throughout this land. They are very tiny. I watched the mothers when they deposited the eggs. They were weak and hurried, for death was already upon them. They quivered as they performed this last act that God had imposed upon them. They had no time to hunt out safe places, and so they deposited their eggs just under the surface of the ground. You can dig them out with your little finger, on every square foot of your land. You need only brush the dust aside and you have them lying before you; you can do what you will with them. If you take your ploughs and go over the land, not a trace of them will remain."

"But suppose they do remain?" Schermer asked, slowly letting Johnny sink to the ground, because he could no longer support him.

"Then God will make them freeze in the winter."

"And suppose He does not do that?"

"Then He will drown them in the spring."

"And suppose He does not do that?"

"Then He will strike them down with the drought in the summer."

The farmers stood in silence. Some nodded quietly and placed their hands in their pockets.

"But what if none of these things happens?" Miller asked. "What if God holds His hand over them and allows them to hatch in our fields?"

"If He does that, then it is His will that *you* shall destroy them. Then He wishes to raise you to greatness, to make you glorious, to make you true tillers of His soil." Jeremiah's voice had swelled once more; the strong night wind carried it over the prairie. "Then it is His will that you do more than cultivate His land, harvest His fruits and tend His cattle in your barns. He desires more of you than that you weigh and reckon, calmly and temperately, and draw the line under the sum of what you have done at the year's end. He asks more of you than that you age, grow more experienced and at last die because all must die. He wishes you to become one with His land; he would have His land watered with your tears and He would have your heart take root in His soil. Then He means for you to become His people upon His earth not to be parted or uprooted from it for all time."

"Amen, Amen," Lydia cried. And many of the others whispered, "Amen, Amen."

Jeremiah's speech had helped the farmers. That was it, by God. What their hands had gripped they would hold until the bones of their fingers were broken. They conversed in low voices, nodded and yawned, and began thinking of soup and bread.

"And how are we supposed to get through the winter?" Heinrich Bieber asked suddenly.

The Mennonites looked up, trying to see who had spoken so challengingly.

"You are Heinrich Bieber," Jeremiah said quietly. "That's right, isn't it, you are Heinrich Bieber?"

"Yes."

"God bless you, brother. It was good of you to have come."

"He's closed up the farm, that's why he's come," Clara burst out. "Left it, just as it was. Let the Lord have His will, he said; He is stronger than I and He must know why He has taken all from me."

She laughed scornfully and approached Jeremiah, the baby in her arms. "Do you understand a man who always sees the black-side of things and then gets it into his head all of a sudden that God must perform a miracle? And is offended because God doesn't do it? As if miracles happened nowadays——"

She broke off because she suddenly realized that she stood among utter strangers, talking about affairs that were no one's concern but her own.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I shouldn't be talking about my own affairs here. We come from up there on the hill. Our name is Bieber."

"Pleased to meet you," Schermer murmured from the gloom. Some of the others touched their hats, nodded and murmured the same formula. Then there was silence, except for Johnny's rumbling snore; he had fallen asleep.

"There are miracles, even to-day, sister," Jeremiah said. "But why should God resort to miracles when a man is still able to help himself? It would be different if you were at the end of your rope."

"Isn't that where we are now?" Bieber asked.

"No. How different you would appear if you were at the end of your rope. Your bins would be empty, your cattle slaughtered and eaten. You would have eaten your horse too, and perhaps your cat. You would have begun cooking grass and bark and roots; and at night you would stop up your ears so as not to hear your children crying. You would be tempted to dig from the earth the grain you sowed sparsely; and you would go down to the brook and catch tiny fish with your bare hands, and give them to your family as a great prize. Then you would be at the end of

your rope. Do you hear, Heinrich Bieber? Not until then would you be at the end."

Again there was silence.

"Well, what are we to do?" Bieber demanded at last.

"I do not yet know all that can be done," Jeremiah said. "But a few things are clear immediately. There is fodder enough for the stock in the uncultivated land. Your cows will grow accustomed to buffalo grass, if there is no bluegrass or clover. To-morrow you can harrow your gardens again, and if God and the weather are kind, you will harvest vegetables before winter. You can dig out the potatoes . . ."

"The potatoes have been eaten," Miller said.

"The potatoes have been eaten on all the fields that lie high and dry. But there is the place where a dam once stood and the soil was wet; there they have been spared."

"Where the dam stood?" Schermer asked.

"I think there must have been a dam there. It's back in the valley; there are still planks and beams lying around, and the earth looks as if it had recently been given a good soaking."

"And the potatoes have been spared there?"

"The onions as well."

"And there are potatoes still in the ground?"

"Under every plant."

"Under every plant," Schermer repeated. "Oh, my God, under every plant."

"Do you hear, Albert?" Patricia shouted hysterically. "Do you hear? You saved the potatoes. My husband saved the potatoes. His dam backed the water up on the land, and the water made the ground wet, and the wet ground protected the potatoes."

She threw her head and her shoulders back and addressed herself to the sky. "Great, Almighty God in heaven, we are staying on this land," she said. "We are stupid and weak, but we understand now what You desire of us. Forgive us the doubt in our hearts and the stupidity of our minds, and forgive especially the stupidity of Your son, Albert Parker. We should have suspected when You gave us the child in my womb, and we should have known when You sent us the horse. I thank Thee humbly, that Thou hast not turned Thy face from us in impatience, as we would have done. Holy Virgin of Padua, intercede for us and let God know what I mean by the stupid chatter of my mouth, so that He will smile in kindness upon me as He smiles upon all His children."

She was scarcely finished when Lydia began to speak. Her voice wavered on the verge of tears, and to command it she made long pauses between sentences.

"You may stop your ears, but I will shout. You may run away, but I will run after you. You may lock yourselves in your houses, but my

voice will come to you through the windows. You may mock or despise me, consider me mad or possessed, but still I will speak to you.

"You are many and I am alone. I live among you; day after day you say a word to me or look at me or smile at me. But that is all. It is not much, brothers and sisters, it is not much. The loneliness remains; the night surrounds one and one must grope for the way. The heart must be overcome; if it is warm and alive, longing to come out of its solitude, it must be pinched between the fingers and crushed until it becomes hard. This is the lot for one who is marked out among you; so is it, and the marked one must get used to it and cease to feel it as pain.

"But because it is so, and because I have nothing to lose; because I bear the mark on my brow in any case, I can speak out where others must keep silent."

Her voice swelled, and the words rolled in sudden torrent from her lips. "Hallelujah, praise ye the Lord, a miracle is come. A miracle is come for the blind and the deaf and the hard of heart, for the dulled and the hollow. Hallelujah, salvation and glory and honour and power unto the Lord, our God.

"Praise ye the Lord, a miracle has come and the land is saved. One has come who is to show us the way; the Lord has sent him, as He sent Albert Parker to build the dam. Yea, this is not the beaten path; this is not in your laws. This you cannot understand and measure, for this is not in the ancient ways.

"But this is, and none can say it nay; none can deny it with silence or trample it underfoot. This is so vast that it reduces us all to nought; so huge that all of you tremble to think on it.

"I alone do not tremble, for the Lord is with me; me alone among you all has He given sight, for ever He chooses the solitary out of the many. Hallelujah, hallelujah, salvation and glory and honour and power unto the Lord, our God!"

The farmers could hear the gasping breath of the girl, as though her mouth was still open and panting. Gradually it quieted.

"Let us go home," Miller said woodenly. "To-morrow we will confer and lay our plans. However, right here and how we promise Mr. Parker, for having unwittingly done good, though he intended evil, his full share of the potatoes, and of everything else we harvest. This is all for to-night, I think."

"Is that really all?" Jeremiah asked.

"Yes, Mr. Kentrup, that is really all. The way of the Mennonites is straight and narrow, and it has been marked out by God. One behind the other, we have been following it for generations, each in the footsteps of his fathers. It is a long and weary way, but the ground under our feet is firm and reliable; and the words of the Scriptures mark out our direction. They have served us well for three hundred years, Mr.

Kentrup, and our minds and hearts are slow-moving and suspicious. What has lasted for three hundred years will do well for a few years more. We are deaf and blind, Mr. Kentrup, but the path is trodden out; we know it well and can follow it in the dark, confident that it is right and good; we need not grope or search, nor hope for signs and miracles."

He took several steps away from the circle of men and into the blackness, then stood still and turned again toward Jeremiah. "No offence meant, Mr. Kentrup," he added. "You know this land better than we do, and we shall be honoured and pleased if you will help us and advise us. We shall be glad to have you stay here. But we know the way of the Mennonites better than you do. Good night, Mr. Kentrup."

Jeremiah smiled. God had helped him. He had opened the door that His servant might enter. God was at his side and all was well.

"God bless you, Brother Miller," he cried into the night; but there was no answer.

Then the others began to go. Their heavy boots shuffled across the land, and when they passed Jeremiah they murmured a greeting. Jeremiah replied to each in his quiet, friendly voice.

Someone touched his arm.

"We have the horse here, if you want it," Patricia said.

"Don't you need it?"

"This afternoon we didn't need it. But now we do, I guess."

"Then why don't you keep it?"

"You see, it's this way. We came to give it back to you. If we go away we don't need the animal, we said to ourselves. And if we don't need it, we'll give it back. But now it's different again." She paused in embarrassment. "Don't you want to say something, Albert?" she asked the dark figure that stood at her side.

Parker cleared his throat. Then he seemed to kick himself sharply, for his voice became much louder than necessary.

"We wanted to ask whether you'd like to stay with us. We'd be very proud to have you. We could set up a bed in the kitchen, next to the stove—so we'd be sort of paying you back for the horse . . ."

For a while they stood watching the figures of the others retreating into the darkness and listening to the low conversations and the sound of footsteps.

"Yes," Jeremiah said at last. "I'll stay with you, and I'm very grateful for your kindness."

They set out over the prairie, the horse snorting and puffing behind them.

When they had come almost to Miller's house, they caught up with Betty Maxwell.

"Good evening," she said in her low-pitched, masculine voice.

"Good evening, sister," Jeremiah replied.

"All alone?" Patricia asked.

"Uh-huh."

They walked on for a while.

"All alone," Betty repeated.

"Where's your husband?"

"In the wagon."

"I suppose he doesn't think much of funerals and such?"

"No."

"A good idea with his trade?" Parker laughed.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that it's better not to think about death when your conscience isn't clean."

Betty stopped abruptly, and Jeremiah, who was behind her, walked into her.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"Don't bother. It's nothing at all if you walk all over me. You can insult me all you like. It doesn't matter whether I save a baby's life or carry water or wear the skin off my hands fixing a pump; it doesn't matter what I do, I'm still dirt to you. You know what you think of me and that's all there is to it. I'm as filthy as a whore and . . ."

"Shut up," Patker interrupted.

"Why should she?" Patricia said loudly. "Why shouldn't she say what she feels?"

"I'm sorry," Betty murmured, recalling what she had been told about Patricia.

She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and stepped to one side of the road. "Pass if you like," she growled.

Jeremiah laughed softly. "But we don't want to pass, sister. We want all to walk abreast, to feel that you belong to us on this wonderful earth; that God is with you as He is with all His children."

"I don't know about that," Betty said. "If it's so, I wouldn't notice. If you ask me, everyone is all alone. If anyone gives a hoot in hell about him, it's the devil."

She began striding on. She seemed suddenly to be in a great hurry. The others did not catch up to her until the lights of Miller's house appeared out of the darkness. She was sitting on a stone at the side of the road.

"What would you say if I stayed on here?" she asked when she saw them.

"It would be wonderful."

Patricia laid her hand on Betty's shoulder and bent toward her.

"You fit in here as though God had made you for this land," she said.

"From the very first I sensed that you belong to us. I have an eye for

people. You get it somehow when you come from where I come from."

"Aren't you married to the little fellow?" Parker asked.

"Sure."

"Will he stay too?"

"I don't know what he'll do. You see, that's what's so complicated about it. Homer is lost without me. He's clever and sly as a fox, but he'll starve and freeze if there's no one to take care of him. He's more a child than a man. He has a body like a boy of ten, and he isn't all right in other things, if you know what I mean. He must be looked after or he'll go to the dogs. There has to be someone who's good to him, someone he knows he belongs to. The land disgusts him. He says it's crazy to dig your food out of the dirt, when you can sit in a warm room and buy your bread from the baker. He says farmers were all right a hundred years ago, but they must be exterminated like the buffalo."

"Poor man," Jeremiah said.

"Yes."

"Stupid idiot," Patricia growled. "Stupid in his heart, not in his head."

"Maybe Jeremiah could talk to him," Parker suggested.

"No," Betty shook her head and sighed.

"I'd like to speak to Betty alone," Patricia said suddenly.

The men went on; Patricia sat down on the ground beside the stone.

"Listen," she whispered, "this is something I don't want to say in front of Jeremiah Kentrup. He's a pious man and God speaks to him, so it's better he doesn't hear things that we can say without harm. I'm an old hand with men. I know them inside and out. Your man seems to me the kind you have to be sweet and short with. He's one of the ugly sort. He pretends you have to chew his food for him because he knows that makes you weak. He prefers you to think he's like a child so you'll forget that he's not really a man. You have to give it to him straight. Look here, my boy, you have to say, I'm a big strong healthy woman. I have broad feet and strong thighs and firm breasts, and I haven't been placed in the world to be unfruitful as a cripple."

Patricia laid her hands on her belly; her baby was stirring.

"Well, and?" Betty asked.

Patricia took Betty's hand and placed it against her body. "Do you feel it?" she asked.

"Is it your baby?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's moving."

"And how it's moving. It's kicking me in the belly as though it wants to get out right now." She laughed foolishly.

They sat for a while without talking.

"Forgive me," Patricia said finally. "It always makes me sort of confused to feel it."

She released Betty's hand. "Where was I?" she asked.

"'Unfruitful as a cripple' was the last thing you said, I think."

"Oh, yes, unfruitful as a cripple. Look here, my boy, you must say, unfortunately I know where you stand in that respect. I suppose it's not your fault; God just made you that way. But you should have talked up before we got married. You didn't, and that's cost me several years of my life. Now I've had enough."

"And then?"

"Then you must send him packing."

"And suppose I can't?"

Patricia stood up. She leaned close to Betty and ran her hand over the woman's hand. "If you can't, you can't. But you'll never get anywhere with a man like that by being easygoing and kind. All you can do is throw him out. Throw him out and then come to us. That's all."

Silently they followed the men. They did not catch up to them until they were almost at the wagon that was still parked in front of Miller's house.

A lantern was burning in the Biebers' wagon. It hung from the roof, spreading a gentle light. It was an old lantern that they had owned from the time they lived near Lich in Upper Hesse. It hung in a wire frame; the glass was slightly yellowed and the wick looked like a plump blond pigtail.

There was not much room in the wagon, but enough for Clara and Heinrich to sit facing each other on two boxes. The baby was asleep in a corner; the cat sat camel-fashion on the driver's seat and blinked sleepily into the night.

Clara took Heinrich's hands. "Do you remember that time in spring when it seemed it was never going to rain?"

"God knows, you'll never let me forget it."

"Then you remember I was right, and the rain came overnight and everything was changed."

Heinrich smiled sadly and shook his head. "And we fools thought our troubles were over," he said.

Clara moved closer to him. Her hands fingered along his wrists and closed on them, while her knees touched his knees. She bent far forward until she felt his breath against her face, and the warmth of his presence. Then she lifted his hands to her breasts and held them there until they clung of themselves and were good to her in their awkward tenderness.

Heinrich closed his eyes. His expression was gentle and a little silly, and there was a smile around his half-open mouth. It was good to have her with him, close to him. He had almost forgotten what it was like; it was new and lovely; it entered into his body, filling him, until the memory of the locusts was carried away in the current that flooded

through him. Nothing remained but a few hazy thoughts, and something you preferred not to talk about because it revealed your weakness and your stupidity.

They parted suddenly when they heard someone coming up to the wagon.

"God bless you," Jeremiah said softly. He looked in.

"Thank you."

Clara felt herself flushing. She got up to look after the baby.

"I shall be your neighbour for a while."

"Our neighbour?"

"I'm staying with the Parkers."

There was a silence, during which they heard Betty's voice from the Maxwell wagon, though she was obviously making an effort to speak softly. "I'm not crazy, Homer, but I'm sick of it," she was saying. "I've been sick of it for a long time, but since we've come here I can't stand it. I don't want to make a big fuss about how things stand with us, and I don't want to hurt you. Maybe everything would have been all right if George—God rest his soul—hadn't given us this idea about the locusts."

Bieber cleared his throat and shifted his box back. He felt uneasy eaves-dropping, and he wanted the Maxwells to know that people could hear.

But Maxwell had begun to shout, so loudly that he could be heard as far as Miller's house.

"Did you ever hear the like of it? Mrs. Betty Maxwell wants to be a farmer. What do you know? Her old life doesn't satisfy her. Her husband doesn't satisfy her. Her money doesn't satisfy her. She wants to walk behind the plough and cart manure. She wants to be fruitful. Lord God in heaven, she wants to be fruitful."

He began to giggle. Then there was a loud sound, as though someone had crashed a fist on the table. After that the listener could hear nothing but an indistinct whispering.

Bieber stood up, bending forward to avoid hitting his head against the low roof.

"You're right, Mr. Kentrup," he said. "You will be our neighbour, and if you like we'll all go out together to gather wild grass for our stock. Five can do more than three, and our oxen will help along with your horse."

He turned slowly to Clara.

"What do you say to that?" he asked.

Clara nodded, unable to speak.

It was cold and dark. Parker borrowed a blanket and a lantern from the Biebers. He gave Jeremiah the lantern to hold and threw the blanket over Patricia's shoulders.

"Not for you, but for the baby," he said, drawing the corners of the blanket over her chest and tying them into a knot.

Patricia laughed, but she let him tend her, and enjoyed a sense of wonderful weariness. She placed her foot on Albert's cupped hands and clambered to the back of the old horse. The warmth of the animal's body made her feel better, and the curve of its back was like a soft pillow under her thighs.

"There are lights in all the houses," Parker said.

Patricia started out of her doze.

One side of the road was dark. This was the side where the valley and the brook lay. There, opposite the hill, night hung like a veil. On the other side were the houses of Gnadenau, bright with the yellow light of the lamps. The doors were open, so that you could see into the rooms.

At the big round tables sat the farmers and their wives and children. Before them were pale bowls and plates, and clay jugs; quietly they ate and drank heaven's provender for that evening. On the white-scoured wooden tables lay the heavy round loaves, and on every table was the small black prayer-book. Those outside could feel the peacefulness of these houses. The smells of the rooms must be of milk soup, of the farmers' clothes, and, faintly, of the fresh wood of the framework. The air would be warm and lulling, so that one could chew and swallow and grow sleepy without the disharmony of thought. The farmers leaned against the table and laid their arms on the top.

Now and then a child came to the door to see who was passing so late through the village street. When it recognized Jeremiah, it waited at the door until he was out of sight, then went back into the room.

"It was the man with the red beard," the child would say. "He was carrying a lantern, and behind him someone was walking leading a horse, and there was a lady on the horse."

"So, so." The farmers nodded, and no more was said about the matter.

Patricia felt warm and comfortable under the blanket. She looked over the horse's head at Jeremiah, who was walking slowly in front of them, now and then lifting the lantern high so that Albert and the horse could avoid a stone. When he did this his face was illuminated for a moment; it was gentle and smiling, yet there was a certain massive strength.

She had never known anyone like him. Not that he was handsome; not that you lost your head and felt you had to love him and desired nothing else in the world. Not like some men she had known, before whom she was helpless and lost, defenceless as a child when they came into the room. Probably she would never have dared go to bed with the preacher, and if she had she would have been afraid and ashamed and hated herself. Or perhaps the lightning would have struck her. What was it that marked him out, that made his ugly face beautiful and his crooked shoulders straight, that transformed his weakness into strength?

A small figure appeared suddenly at Jeremiah's side. Patricia could see little more than his bare legs, because he was walking in the preacher's shadow; the lantern was on the other side. He had a high, thin voice, and seemed to walk on tiptoe, as children do who walk barefoot.

"Good evening, sir," he said.

"God bless you, Carrot," Jeremiah said, taking the child's hand.

"Where are you going, sir?"

"To the Parkers', up on the hill."

"Then you're staying around here?"

"Yes."

"And you won't leave us alone with the dead locusts?"

"I won't leave you alone."

For a while the child walked at the man's side. The road had begun to climb; they were beyond the last house of the village. They could not be far from the spot where Agnes had died, and from the spot where the Parkers had looked out over the village at dusk.

Jeremiah stood still and turned. He lifted the lantern slightly, so that Parker could see that he had stopped.

"What's the matter?" Albert asked.

"I'm still a little weak. If you don't mind, I'd like to rest a few minutes, just to catch my breath."

"You must sit down, sir," Carrot cried. He pointed to a stone that crouched, dark and massive, at the edge of the road. Near this spot the tent of the two old men had stood.

"Wouldn't you like to ride?" Patricia asked. "I might just as well walk a little; I think it might be good for the baby too."

Jeremiah shook his head.

"Look around you," he said. "Don't worry about me. All is well with me; God is with me, to help me, as He is with all His children."

The darkness filled the valley as the sun had filled it in the daytime. On both sides it was without limit; and the tiny string of lights from the houses of the Mennonites was no more than the narrow hem of this vast garment. The light of Jeremiah's lantern penetrated only a few yards. But still, it was a light, and by it the legs of the men and the horse could be seen, and the stones on the ground glistened like tiny crystals.

"One night father did not come home," Patricia said, feeling suddenly oppressed by the silence. "It was a horrible night. We were very poor; we had no oil for the lamp, nothing but a candle. We were so frightened, because we thought the darkness would fall upon the light and kill it. We imagined the darkness was like a man, with hands and breath, sometimes bad and sometimes good, but always hating the light. It waited until you were not watching, and then it came and snuffed the light between its fingers. When father came home at last and saw our red eyes and heard what was the matter, he sat down at the table with us. In the

middle of the table stood the candle, and the light it gave was so bright and wonderful. When we were all quiet and looking at him, ashamed because we'd been afraid, he said quietly: 'In all the world there is not so much darkness that it can extinguish the light of a single candle.' "

She fell silent and looked at Jeremiah, who was leaning on Carrot, his head tilted and seemingly unaware of her speech. His eyes were closed and his knees bent, his feet parallel on the uneven road. He looked like a weary ploughman resting at evening, the work done and the seed sown.

"I'm not afraid of the dark," Carrot said in the ensuing silence.

"No need to be." Parker laughed. He looked at them all, one after the other.

When no one laughed with him, he cleared his throat in embarrassment and began patting the horse's neck. The sound was rough and bold and comforting in the strange stillness of the night.

After a while the animal turned its head and inclined its forehead against Parker's shoulder. It snorted softly and tenderly and Parker held a whispered conversation with it, praising it for being a fine animal and a good old fellow, saying all the things a man says to a horse when it is dark and no one is listening.

"Let us go on," Jeremiah said suddenly. The man and woman and the child started, then turned to look at him. He had lifted the lantern, so that they could see his face. It was bright, and different from the way they had known it. They wanted to ask what had happened to him, but they could not form the words. They remained still, and their breathing paused. The horse stopped snorting; the wind died down, and the night stood still and waited.

It was so; his face was bright. It was alight, and you did not know why. You sensed the illumination more than you saw it; it thrust itself into you, converting your heart's hardness to tenderness. All at once you knew you were not lost or forgotten or driven forth from your kind; that you were a child of man and a child of God. Tears filled your eyes; your lips quivered and you were not ashamed of your frailty, nor of the ingenuousness of your heart.

Slowly it came to you what this illumination was upon the face of Jeremiah Kentrup. And unknowingly, inaudibly, ineptly, your lips stammered the words that Jeremiah was saying:

"Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him, upon them that hope in His mercy; to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive in famine.

"Our soul waiteth for the Lord: He is our help and our shield, for our heart shall rejoice in Him, because we have trusted in His holy name.

"Let Thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, according as we hope in Thee."

"Amen."

BUT MEN LIVE FOREVER!

ONE MORNING IN OCTOBER of the same year Jonathan Ginzburger drove his little wagon across the land from Topeka. It was laden with pots and pans, shovels, spades and hammers, and the thousand and one other things that farmers might need. It was sound goods, and expensive; all of it was strong enough to outlive its owner, if properly handled.

In his pocket Ginzburger carried a small black notebook. He bought one every year in September; it contained, in addition to clean, white pages, a calendar and a list of the Jewish holidays. Regularly, on January 1st, he wrote the word "stock" in the upper left-hand corner of the first page, and under this word he placed a figure. Underneath he entered all that he had bought, and on the opposite page all that he sold. At the end of each week he tried to record the surplus that was left after he and his horse had eaten and lived for the week. Usually it was very little, for times were bad; people had little money, and this they had to keep for the barest necessities.

Never in his life had Ginzburger been far ahead. He felt that he knew too much about life and death to take business seriously. While he remained with the prospectors, the poker games had always taken care of his profits. But even he had never seen times like these; heaven only knew what would come of it all. When had it ever happened that even the farmers were going hungry? They had sent a committee to the government to appeal for food for ten thousand people for six months; and for ten thousand blankets; and clothes and seed for ten thousand people. How was business possible, when the customers were beggars? How could he expect them to buy dishes and pots, and the handy new sausage grinder on which he had placed such high hopes, when they did not know where their next loaf of bread was to come from?

What was worse, those who had salvaged a little from the disaster could not sell their produce. No one had money. Almost overnight it had vanished; it had become a rarity; not even on foolproof security could you raise money. In Topeka they had said there was a panic, and a panic was a panic, as a cloudburst was a cloudburst. If you had no money, you didn't buy things; and if you had no food, you starved; and if you couldn't be buried, the vultures would feed on you. Forty cents was a high price for a bushel of wheat; if a farmer didn't like it, let him keep his wheat. Eight cents for corn and five for a dozen eggs and eight for a pound of butter; yes or no, take it or leave it.

Ginzburger shook his head. He had stayed in Topeka over the Holy Days, and listened to the talk among his people. "Why do you want to go to the farmers, Jonathan?" they had counselled. "They've been hit not only by the panic, but by the locusts and all the other troubles there are. Where's your common sense, Jonathan? Where's your business sense? And where is the blessing of God?"

He himself did not know, but he had packed his goods on the wagon. After all, a little trade was better than none. They would need nails, he told himself, and wire and needles; if they had no money, they would have wheat, and wheat is as good as money. They'll pay me in wheat: a bushel is worth forty cents; that's all there is to it. Jonathan Ginzburger can't stop trading because there's a panic in the country and no money to be had; Jonathan Ginzburger has to live, and travel through the land with his wagon and his horse and all his knick-knacks.

When Ginzburger came to Gnadenau, he hung a bell around his horse's neck, so that the people would hear him and come out of their houses. It was a good day; the sun was warm and friendly for business. The copper pots gleamed like gold.

Ginzburger produced a dust mop. It had an unusually long handle, so that you could reach things in the out-of-the-way corners which no one could see, so that they didn't really have to be clean. He also had beer mugs with tin covers, clay pipes embossed with the head of Napoleon III, sealed liquor bottles (Tantalus brand), and a large number of other things that you accumulated and never got rid of in all your travels from the prospectors to the farmers, and from the farmers to the silver miners, and from the silver miners to the salt pit workers. You dusted them off, to have something to do while the villagers assembled, and to give the people time to examine your stuff and warm up to one thing or another that they needed. You behaved as if you didn't know they were standing around, but you kept a sharp eye out to make sure they broke nothing when they took things in their hands and tapped them or held them up to the light or sniffed them, or turned and twisted them, examining them from all sides, as though the decision was one of life and death, when all the bowl cost was seventy-five cents. You listened to their talk, because it was important to know how the wind was blowing. "Not bad stuff," they would say, "but who can buy things in these times; and what can you use to pay for it, when money is so scarce you've forgotten what it looks like? Still, this is good ware, and even the tinsmith says the kettle can't be fixed; and all the plates have been patched, and the saw is crooked and the door hinges are rusty."

At this point Ginzburger spoke up. It was always hard to sense just the right moment; you had to feel it in your finger tips, or you'd spoil everything. "Look at everything closely, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I don't want anybody to buy a cock for a hen, as the saying goes; and I

don't want anyone to think he can't buy a pot because he doesn't happen to have any cash. And *what* pots, ladies and gentlemen. Just look at this one. One quarter of an inch of good strong black iron, round and smooth, and with solid handles on both sides so that a woman needn't be afraid when she takes it off the stove or out of the oven. A quarter of an inch on the bottom, and a quarter of an inch cover. No, the cover isn't any lighter. It's just as strong, just as solid and hard as the rest of the pot. This isn't something for to-day or to-morrow; it's something for your children and your children's children, if God wills."

"How much is it?" someone asked.

"Oh, yes, how much is it? If I said five dollars, you would be amazed that it's so reasonable. But do I say five dollars? No, I do not say five dollars. I bought it cheaply, because money is scarce, and I'll sell it cheaply. And I don't say four dollars, either. Why should I say four dollars, when I don't want four dollars? Am I a thief, come to take your money out of your pocket, or a trader who'll come back every year to do a little business with you? I want you to talk well of me, even though I'm not around to hear it because I'm at Salt Lake or in Boise or somewhere else, where people are waiting for me. This pot costs three dollars and fifty cents, and if you don't have it in cash, Ginzburger will take corn or wheat or potatoes or eggs. Money is scarce. Well, what of it? Is life going to stop because money is scarce? Are we going to dance around the golden calf and be blind to what really counts? Money is just imagination, no more than dirty pieces of paper. But here is a pot and there is wheat, both are good; you need the one and I need the other, so let us talk about it until we agree and you have the pot and I have the wheat."

When Ginzburger saw that the high price cooled their interest he began to talk about other things. He had a wonderful way of describing his wares. He sniffed the nails and opined that you could smell the steel; he balanced hammers on his index finger to show that the heads did not weigh too much or too little. He discussed a knife with a horn handle as he would a living thing. Of a clay jug he said that it had pores and breathed like the earth of which it was made.

At last he did a little barter business. They brought him some of last year's barley and received in return a hammer and tongs, and a package of needles thrown in. The barley smelled mouldy and was beginning to sprout; Ginzburger knew he would have a hard time getting rid of it. But a trade was a trade; he could enter new names in his little book, and that was something.

They loaded the barley on the wagon. There were two full sacks, and one half-full. The sacks were old, with patches of coloured cloth over the holes the mice had gnawed.

"Were the locusts bad here?" Ginzburger asked.

Schermer, who had bought a hammer and was hefting it like something cast of pure gold, nodded.

"Four swarms in one week; it's hard to believe, but it happened. They all came from out there"—he gestured toward the west—"all from the same place, and all of them came down on our fields and gardens and trees. All over them, and no mercy." He shook his head. "It was pretty big, if you ask me, and I wouldn't like to go through it again."

"I can imagine. Takes a good deal of guts to live through it."

Schermer nodded his head thoughtfully.

Ginzburger looked at the children, who had sat down on the edge of the wagon. The girls wore faded aprons and skirts pale from many scrubblings; the boys' pants were tattered. It was easy to see they were poor and getting along with their old things. But their bare legs were strong; their faces were plump and smooth, and their eyes clear. They stared at Ginzburger as though trying to find a place for him in their world.

"Seems you can stand it," Ginzburger said. "Those kids don't seem to be hungering."

Schermer laughed. "Well, you see, God doesn't forget farmers, and a farmer doesn't starve easily. In July we had the locusts and they ate the wheat and the corn and the potatoes and the cabbage and everything green. We thought we'd have to run our heads against the wall, or pack up and become hired men or workers in the city. But in the end you stay where you are, because you're tough and simple-minded and stubborn, and perhaps because God has let you know He means well with you. And in October we're harvesting beans and beets and carrots, and if the frost holds off till November we'll have potatoes. That's the way it is in a farmer's life."

Ginzburger nodded. Yes, he knew what the farmer's life was. Stay put, Jonathan, his father had always said. Don't run around here and there like a crazy man, trying to call God's attention to yourself and your doings. If you are just, He will find you wherever you are; if you are wicked, He will not seek you out. Why should you weary your legs, if it is only to weary your heart? Look at your father, Jonathan. Does he have money? Look in the tin box by the window, and if you find two rubles there, you can call yourself a rich man. Is he happy? Look upon my life, and if you find a single day without unhappiness for me, you can call me a happy man. Well, then, what am I? I'm a contented man, Jonathan. A man who sits in his house and in his field, closes his eyes and stops his ears, and hears nothing and sees nothing and knows nothing except that his life is like this, just like this, no different, and it will be like this if God wills until the end.

A few weeks afterward the Cossacks had killed him.

Ginzburger brushed his hand over his eyes.

"I'll be back in the spring, God willing," he said, and began to clamber up on the box. He felt suddenly dissatisfied with himself. He could see by the farmers' faces that they thought him a *schlemihl*; that they despised him for letting them get the better of him. This wasn't the way a real trader acted, agreeing to everything, not making a fuss, not crying out that they were robbing him and ruining him.

Ginzburger picked up the reins and considered. He felt that he had had a bad day. Whenever he thought of the past, he had a bad day; he grew soft and felt that nothing was important save his being alive rather than buried in a mass grave near Kiev. But these farmers didn't know that.

He remembered a joke. A joke was always handy for a trader. It was something the farmers remembered long after they had used a sheet of paper imprinted with his name for other purposes.

He leaned forward. "Do you know the story about the housewife and the locusts?" he asked.

"No," the farmers said, drawing closer to the wagon.

"Well, then, I'll tell you. One day a woman wanted to plant geraniums in a flowerpot. What do geraniums grow in? In earth. So she got some earth from the garden, filled the pot with it, and put the pot on the stove. Then she went to see her next-door neighbour, and they gossiped awhile about this and that; time passed and the morning passed and the afternoon came. Meanwhile the warmth of the stove hatched the locust eggs in the flowerpot, and out stepped seven thousand bushels of locusts. First they ate the green shades on the windows, then the dustpan that was painted green, then an Irish servant girl, then the stove and the stovepipe. Finally they tore down the house to get at the chimney, which was painted green. Then they ate each other. When the woman came home, there was nothing left but two giant locusts playing mumblety-peg with a carving knife to see which would have the cellar."

The farmers looked at one another and laughed uneasily. The story impressed them as anything but funny.

"Is that all?" Schermer asked at last.

"No," said Ginzburger, who had been waiting for this question. "The woman sued the fire insurance company for damages, and won the suit because the fire in the stove was the cause of it all. Good-bye."

He rode off with the laughter of the farmers ringing in his ears. He was pleased with himself; he knew they had changed their opinion of him.

At the end of the village, on the upward slope out of the valley, he caught up with a girl. She was tall and strong, and took great strides with her long legs.

"Well, miss, where are you bound?" Ginzburger asked.

"Up on the hill."

The girl's voice was harsh; her lips were narrow and a frown seemed etched into her forehead; but she looked at him with friendliness and seemed glad to speak with a stranger.

"Fine country," Ginzburger said, getting off the wagon to lighten the horse's burden.

"It is a beautiful country," she said.

Beside her Ginzburger seemed small and pitiable. She was almost a head taller than he, and carried herself stiffly erect.

"My name is Ginzburger, miss," he said.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Lydia Miller."

Ginzburger murmured acknowledgment, and for a while they walked in silence.

Now and then the man glanced surreptitiously at the girl. It was remarkable how easily she breathed; she seemed to be climbing the hill without effort. Her feet were like instruments that she employed with sureness and skill; she never stumbled or slipped, as he did, on the uneven road. She belonged to this land like some wild creature that had been born on this slope.

"You know, we've ploughed all this since the locusts died," she said, gesturing in a wide circle over the land. "First we burned the stubble. It was a tremendous fire, because everything was so dry; the smoke hung over the village for days. Sometimes we thought we would all smother to death. All day long tears ran down our faces. At night we took turns standing guard, to make sure the fire didn't get out of control. I don't think I changed my clothes for four days. I'm one of the strongest in the village, so I stood it longer than all the others; I took over their watches when they wanted to get a few hours' sleep. Then, after that was over, the ploughing began. The whole land was grey and covered with ashes, and when the wind came the air was full of black flakes."

She fell silent and stared absently ahead of her.

"Why don't you go on, miss?" Ginzburger asked.

"I must be boring you. Everyone for two hundred miles around has had the same experience and will tell it to you. You must be sick of it."

Ginzburger shook his head. "It was the same everywhere and it was different everywhere. No two people experience the same thing, not even Siamese twins."

"I suppose that's true. Anyway, it was really different here. You see, a man named Jeremiah Kentrup came, who said that God had sent him to help us. The strange part was that he didn't come alone; he was with another man named Johnny Brown, whose wife had died on the way; they brought her body with them to bury her here."

Ginzburger whistled sharply. "What a story," he said.

"That's what our people said at first, and none of us trusted them, for wheresoever the carcass is, there will the vultures be gathered together,

But then Jeremiah preached and all at once we knew there was something about him that nobody could explain. He talked like the rest of us and his words were ordinary words, but somehow it was different and what he said was so—so powerful. I guess it sounds silly to you, the way I rattle on like this; you must think I'm half crazy."

She glanced at Ginzburger to see whether he was smiling. When she saw that his face was grave and he was nodding his head slowly, she went on:

"I don't want you to think he preached like other preachers, saying prayers and quoting from the Scriptures or from the Imitation. No, he didn't do anything like that. He said, 'Farmers, you must burn the stubble; you must set watches to see that the fire does not spread. You must dig trenches. You must plough up your land, and you must plough it deeper than usual. You must plough the mowings too. And you must gather prairie grass for the stock. With the money you have left you must buy poison in Topeka, to spread on the ground lest the locusts hatch in spite of everything. Twenty pounds of bran, one pound of Paris green, two quarts of sorghum syrup, three lemons. You must get together and draw up your plan. How much wheat do you have left? How much corn? How many cows? How much feed?' "

Lydia stopped because she was out of breath. Ginzburger did not disturb her memories; he walked at her side, saying nothing. It was not hard for him to envisage. There were the locusts, and the farmers, and the land that belonged to the farmers. The locusts came like the Cossacks. They appeared out of a monstrous cloud of dust; suddenly they were there, among you, living creatures of flesh and blood; not merely the phantoms of whom you had heard so many stories. Pray, some said, and ran to the synagogue to plead for help from the Eternal. Kill them, said others: Bar the doors and shoot at them; if you cannot shoot, pour scalding water on their heads. Be strong, old Ginzburger, his father had said. Let them take what we have on, let them take everything we have in our closets and boxes. Let them take everything they can move, everything they can lay their dirty hands on. Let them take it; God will punish them. They cannot carry off the most valuable thing of all, not if they had ten thousand horses instead of a hundred; that is here for all time; they can never take it. What is that, Ginzburger? the others had asked. And as he was about to say—he meant the land, of course, and their little garden—a Cossack killed him. You had to be strong . . .

"I beg your pardon," Lydia said. "It's hard to talk walking uphill."

"That's all right, miss."

He walked beside her with bowed head until they came to the plateau, where the road was even and curved in a great arc back over the hills.

Ginzburger stopped the horse and looked around. The houses of

Gnadenau were no longer in sight; the land seemed unmarked and unpossessed. Like great overturned thimbles the hills stood one beside the other; between them were suspended the valleys, the fruitful furrows and fields stretching all the way to the horizon.

"What land," Ginzburger said, nodding his head emphatically, as though seeing Kansas for the first time in his life.

Lydia nodded. "When you live here you sometimes forget it. And the locusts almost made us forget it entirely."

They walked on. The wind was against them now, and the sun shone in their faces, blinding them. The mild warmth of a fall afternoon hung over the withered leaves and grass upon the slope.

"Where are you going?" Ginzburger asked suddenly.

Lydia laughed. "Do you want to get rid of me?"

The old man turned his head mournfully toward her. "Why should I want to get rid of you? Why should I be so *meshuggah* as to think it's better to be alone with a horse and wagon than with another human being?"

He shrugged and lowered his eyelids over eyes that seemed all at once brimming with the whole wisdom of age. Then he turned away from her.

"I didn't mean to offend you," Lydia stammered, flushing. "I just said it without thinking, Mr. Ginzburger; I guess I should have answered you. I know how it is to be alone, and how happy it makes you to walk even a few yards with someone else."

Ginzburger chuckled. "What could you know, miss?" he said. "I don't think you know much about the life of an old man who travels around the country all alone. If your heart is good, you must think—poor old Ginzburger has a hard time of it. Always on the move from dawn to dusk, with no one to take care of him, no one to darn his stockings and wash his shirts and on Fridays cook the meals for Shabbes. Poor old man, who's to help him when he's sick or dying? Am I right, miss? That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

Lydia shook her head.

"What then?" Ginzburger asked.

Lydia frowned. "A few weeks ago I could have told you exactly what it was like," she said. "Until the day the locusts began to die, I myself was so lonesome I would have sold my soul for a single friendly word. It didn't have anything to do with the others; it was something inside of me. It was as though my heart had a scar or a birthmark I was trying to hide. . . . I don't know whether I'm talking so that it makes sense."

She looked inquiringly at Ginzburger.

"Go on, miss, what happened then?"

"Then. Then the locusts died and Jeremiah Kentrup told us what to do. It was hard, and there weren't many who were strong enough to stand it. The wind blows all day long here; when you start a fire you

can't take your eyes off it for a moment. And even then you're never sure it won't break out of bounds. One minute it's low and tame, the next it springs up, licks past you, and there's fire on all sides. Then you have to fight like mad to get it under control; and after a while the thing begins all over again. I was the only one of the women who was able to keep at it. I don't know why, but I was stronger than I'd ever been before, in all my life.

"After the fire burned out, we had to plough. The ground was hard, but we didn't want to wait because we were not sure what the rains would do to the locust eggs. Maybe the rain would strengthen them, or would wash them deeper, where the ploughshare couldn't reach them. So we ploughed; we ploughed until the dust hung like a cloud over the valley and over the hills.

"Then came the gardens. And then gathering the prairie grass. And then a thousand other things. And I worked with the men all the time, till my hands were horny and the muscles on my arms like wet ropes. And while I was working like that, two miracles happened."

In the distance, to their left, the Biebers' house appeared. Smoke rose from the chimney and was borne by the wind over the fields, and the long-drawn mooing of a cow rumbled over the land.

Lydia stood still. Ginzburger tugged on the reins, and after a few hesitant steps the horse halted. The silence struck them forcibly when the creaking of the harness and the rattling of the wheels ceased.

"What's the matter?" Ginzburger asked.

"I'd like to finish the story while we're still alone," Lydia said. "It won't take long, and a few minutes more or less won't make any difference to you."

Ginzburger nodded impassively, and the girl continued:

"The first miracle was that the children changed. My clothes were burned full of holes, my face was black and sweaty, and when they first saw me they were frightened. Then they began telling all sorts of stories about me. That I was as strong as a man, and that I could quench fire with my bare hands, and go barefoot over burning ground, and that God had spoken to me as He had spoken to Jeremiah Kentrup, and I would fall down dead when it was all over and Gnadenau was saved. After the children, the men started. Marvellous how strong Lydia is, they said. She's a girl of the old stock. Like our mothers, who hitched themselves to the plough when the animals were done in. She belongs to us; we have to show her she does. And they began talking to me. 'How do you think we ought to set the watches, Lydia?' they asked. And, 'What do you think we ought to do with the land we can't get to plough right away? Do you think eighteen-inch furrows are deep enough?' And at last the women came to me. They pretended we had always been friendly. 'Why don't you ever come to our spinning bees?' they asked. Or,

'We're having singing to-night, you know.' And I laughed with them and felt warm toward them. I came home; all at once I was well and healthy, and my heart was free. I stood in the midst of the smoke, unable to breathe or see, and I felt that I was on a high mountain. My heart was just as good as any other, and I was no longer ashamed to show it to my people."

Ginzburger looked at her, puzzled. Where was the miracle? Was it a miracle that the farmers grew friendly to the girl who sacrificed herself for the community? Was it a miracle that they flattered her when they needed her to help them earn their daily bread?

Ginzburger brooded, while Lydia stood beside him, remembering. At last Ginzburger smiled. Yes, it was a miracle, after all. It was a miracle, but it had happened to the village; this the girl could not understand, because God had woven His miracle of such fine stuff that she did not see its true texture.

"As for God, His way is perfect," Ginzburger said. "What was the other miracle?"

"The other miracle is about Johnny."

Lydia lowered her eyes, and clasped her hands. Her voice became softer. "I told you that his wife died and we buried her here. At the funeral he was so drunk he didn't know what was going on; and when he woke up he began to cry like a baby. For days he sat in his wagon, and when you passed you could hear him sobbing whenever he wasn't drunk and singing songs, or asleep and snoring. It was so disgusting that one day my father went to him and told him to leave the village. Meanwhile he'd struck up a friendship with a man named Maxwell, a little moneylender whose wife had left him. The two of them shouted that my father could go to the devil, they weren't going to leave their wives in this filthy place. Then they began roaring with laughter at their joke, and started to fling empty bottles around, so that my father had to jump out of the wagon to avoid being hit.

"Let me talk to them," I said to the council. And because they thought so much of me at the time, they agreed.

"Johnny was alone when I came to his wagon. His eyes were bloodshot and he was drooling from the mouth. His shirt was filthy, and his toes showing through his socks, and the smell of the wagon was enough to turn your stomach. I had planned out a whole speech, but when I saw him I kept quiet, because everything I had wanted to say seemed silly. Instead, I started to fix up the place. At first Johnny paid no attention to what I was doing. He started to sing songs that were intended to make me blush, and a couple of times I could feel that my face was on fire. Finally, he started to talk. 'Listen, you,' he said. 'What is this all about?' His voice was hoarse and his words lurched like the ground during an earthquake.

"I pretended not to hear him and went on working. I could feel his eyes on me, and when he tried to stand up, I got frightened.

"'Stay where you are,' I shouted at him. 'You weakling, you limp rag, you filthy coward. Your wife dies, and the next morning you lie in the gutter, getting drunk on whisky and your own tears. God have mercy on you; you're going to the dogs because there's no one to wipe your nose for you.'

"He looked at me and wagged his head, but he had understood me, and he tried to button his shirt. Then he mumbled something that sounded like a swear word, and began to bawl all over again.

"'What's the trouble now, my boy?' I said, and knelt down beside him to help him button his shirt. 'No one has to bear more than he can bear; the sooner you learn that the easier it will be to bear what you must bear. My burden is heavy, you say to God; and He answers you, Your back is broad.'

"I don't know what it was that made me suddenly able to speak like that to a man; but that was the beginning of the miracle. I didn't have to think to find words; they came to me and my mouth spoke them, and there were no other words possible, and no better ones. I felt calm and sure that everything I was doing was right and the thing that would help Johnny.

"From that day on he began to improve. He went on drinking, but less and less every day; and after a while he took to helping us in the garden. He was quiet and talked little about himself. Some of the people felt uneasy at his brooding manner, and they warned father and me that he had some secret purpose. But I knew better, because I knew what he was thinking. I felt what was the matter with him; I understood that he was climbing a hill; he needed all his breath for climbing, and had none for talking. And that was another part of the miracle.

"One day he gave me a thin gold chain, and that evening he and little Maxwell disappeared from the valley. I had foreseen it, and expected it would be hard for me without him and maybe I wouldn't be able to bear it and I'd become as lonely and shut up as I used to be."

She smiled and shook her head vigorously.

"Nothing like that happened, Mr. Ginzburger," she concluded. Her voice was quiet and friendly, and her tone a little like that of her father. "Nothing at all happened; I'm just the way I was when we were building fires and ploughing the land. I wear his chain and I will wait for him, because I know he'll come back. I think that is another miracle."

Old Ginzburger smiled charitably and said, "*Maedeles, maedeles.*" It was hard to say whether or not he judged Lydia Miller's experience a miracle.

Then he hung the bell on the horse, and the old man and the girl walked along until they came to Bieber's house.

Clara heard the tinkling of the bell and came out into the yard with Michael. This was washday; the shirts of the entire family hung on the line, together with Heinrich's red handkerchiefs and woollen socks. The door of the house stood open; the cat lay on the threshold, and the hens moved gently around the yard.

Lydia greeted Clara and kissed the boy. But Michael impatiently pushed her away; he had eyes only for Ginzburger's wagon and its fascinating contents.

"If it was up to him, I'd buy everything," Clara laughed.

Then she chose a few things she urgently needed and paid for them in cash.

"I'm buying them for Betty Maxwell," she said to Lydia, as though she felt it necessary to apologize for having money. "She's gone to gather fodder with Heinrich. She wants us to get the things we need most. She's a fine woman, when you get to know her."

Lydia laughed happily. "God knows what would have become of her if she had not come here," she said.

"Yes, you're right about that," Clara said. She was holding a number of tin plates in her hand, and inspecting a washboiler at the same time. "She doesn't like to talk about the past, but she's told me a few things. . . . What did you say?" she asked Ginzburger.

"Your children will be washing their clothes in that," the old man said. "What am I saying, your children? Your grandchildren. The only way you can break a boiler like that is with a hammer. Maybe you don't see how good it is. There's a new kind of metal in that boiler. The fire makes it stronger and harder as time passes."

"Like ourselves," Lydia said; she was inclined to help the old man.

Clara bent down and placed the tin plates on the ground at her feet. Then she picked up the washboiler. She ran her hand over the edge, the handles and the bottom, feeling the coolness and sleekness of the metal, with the little rough spots that made it seem natural, as though it had been made by an old-fashioned smith.

"For children and grandchildren?" she repeated whimsically.

"As God is my witness," Ginzburger urged. "And maybe longer, if you treat it right."

"How much is it?"

"Four-fifty for you."

Clara shook her head. "A lot of money," she said sadly. "Much too much, even for my children and grandchildren."

"God in heaven," Ginzburger exclaimed, "do you want I should give you the boiler? Do you want I should give you everything I have? Should I live on air?"

The women stared at him, startled by the outburst and wondering at his sudden excitement. But old Ginzburger knew it was because he did

not want to be a *schlemihl* and felt that he was one, after all, he foresaw he would lower his price until he sold the boiler for less than he had paid for it.

Clara bought it finally for three dollars.

"We will call it Jonathan Ginzburger," she said, to console the old man.

"May it help you and your children and your grandchildren," Ginzburger said. He took the bell off the horse and went on with Lydia.

How strange and various had been the trades he had made in his life. Here a farmer's wife bought a washboiler only because it would last for generations, as though a hundred years from now Biebers would live on this land, sowing and harvesting in the seasons of the year. As though the land belonged to them and they to the land, and this was something that nothing could change; they did not hear the onrush of time, nor look down the roads that vanished in the distance; here they were to remain what they were, like some race of immortals.

When he found himself suddenly face to face with Patricia, he at first did not recognize her. Her belly was great and round, her face fuller and her skin tanned and lined.

"Ginzburger," she said, wide-eyed and breathless.

Ginzburger put his hand to his lips, as he did when he was frightened.

"God of righteousness," he whispered.

"Don't you know me any more?"

"How can I, an old man whose eyes are failing? How should I recognize Patricia Coroni, when I knew her as a dancing girl, not as a farmer?"

Patricia put her hands on his shoulders, drew him close to her and kissed him and laughed and cried and talked and asked questions and cursed and blessed him in English, Italian and Chinese. A mad flurry of all the expressions of joy she knew, which ended in an inarticulate stammering.

Ginzburger had been bewildered when she threw her arms around him. But immediately he was glad when she pressed him close to her, so that she could not see his watery eyes and quivering lips. What a silly old man he was. What a *schlemihl*, God, what a *schlemihl*.

When Patricia had recovered her breath, she turned to Lydia.

"Do you know who this is, Lydia?" she asked.

Lydia laughed. "Of course I know."

"Why shouldn't she know?" Ginzburger asked. He ran his hand over his mussed hair and bent down for his hat, which had fallen to the ground.

"Why shouldn't she know?" Patricia said, aping his speech. "She shouldn't know because you don't go travelling with a sign around your

neck saying that you're not just any Jonathan Ginzburger, but *the* Jonathan Ginzburger from Alma." She shook her head in wonderment. "Holy Virgin of Padua, to think I'm seeing you again. To think of it, to think of it."

She glanced around. "I wish Albert was back," she said. "If I knew where he was we could go fetch him."

"How is he?" Ginzburger asked.

"How is he? Ginzburger, look around and tell me yourself how we are."

The old man turned his head.

"Well, you have a farm . . ."

Patricia put her hand over his mouth.

"Oh, be quiet," she said. "I'd better tell you about it before you say something silly." She swept her hair back from one side of her head, then let her hand rest on her neck and threw her head back slightly as she talked.

"In July we thought everything had gone to hell. Our barn had burned down and our oxen were dead and our horse was dead and the locusts had laid eggs in the ground. We were finished, Ginzburger; we were sure of that. We'd taken it on the chin and we thought we'd never get up again. The land would become overgrown and the house would decay, and in two years there'd be nothing left but the fireplace and a few splinters of glass from the windows. *Caputo* the farm, *caputo* Alberto, *caputo* Patricia, *caputo bambino* . . . Then Jeremiah came."

She took Ginzburger's arm and walked slowly across the yard toward the house with him. Lydia remained standing by the wagon, looking after them with a gentle smile on her lips. For a while she could hear what Patricia was saying; then the voice faded to a distant murmur from inside the house.

Lydia tied the reins to the wagon—Ginzburger had forgotten them—and sat down by the well. She touched Johnny's gold chain and shut her eyes. She was no longer alone. She belonged to the others, as the others belonged to her. If she wanted to, she could get up now and follow Patricia and Ginzburger into the house; she could sit down at the table with them and talk and laugh and cry with them. But she preferred to sit in the heavy October sunlight, letting her fingers play with the thin metal of the chain and thinking of Johnny.

She was still sitting there when the figures of Jeremiah and Parker appeared in the distance. Between them the horse trotted, and the sun was above them; they were on the brow of a hill, so that their figures towered darkly into the bright sky. They walked leisurely, leaning backwards on the wind, which came from behind them. Now and then they turned to each other, and Lydia knew they were talking. She could hear the tinkle of the plough as it struck a stone, and after a while the steps

of the horse became audible, thudding dully on the moist autumnal soil.

Gradually they neared, and became more distinct in spite of the blinding sun. They had thrust their hats back on their heads; their faces were flushed with the same sun-flush that painted their big hands and their long arms. A brown crust of dried earth clung to their boots, and their trousers were baggy and worn at the knees. So much sand had been ground into the fibres of the cloth that the blue colour had faded almost brown. Their coloured shirts, too, had taken on some of the colouring of the fields of this land of Kansas.

When they entered the yard, they greeted Lydia and unhitched the horse. Albert led it into the new barn. Lydia deliberately said nothing about Ginzburger, not wanting to spoil Patricia's surprise for Albert. When Albert asked her who had come in the wagon, she shrugged and pointed toward the house. Then she turned to Jeremiah.

"Is it true you are leaving us, brother?" she asked.

"Yes," Jeremiah replied. He sat down on the ground beside her, while Albert languidly crossed the yard and entered the house.

"Listen," she whispered. She lifted her hand, and Jeremiah turned his head and listened.

Then it began. The same cries and laughter and curses and blessings that Lydia had heard when Patricia recognized Ginzburger—except that Albert's voice was much louder; it resounded over the land and went on and on.

"What is it?" Jeremiah asked in alarm.

"They have a visitor."

"A visitor?"

Lydia nodded. "A man named Jonathan Ginzburger; I think he's an old friend of theirs. An old man who trades in that stuff on the wagon. You feel you've known him for a long time, even when you've just met him."

Jeremiah smiled. He thought he knew what Ginzburger was like, and sensed that he would like him.

"Yes, sister, I am leaving," he said at last.

"When?"

"In a day or two."

Lydia shook her head. "I don't understand," she said. "But you must know what is good and what you must do. Have you told Patricia?"

Jeremiah nodded.

"And you are not coming to the village again to say good-bye to us?"

"No."

They sat for a while, accepting the mild and comforting sun that spread its warmth invisibly over the earth, belying the closeness of winter.

"The Lord has turned a page in the book of your lives," Jeremiah said softly. "When He reads it over, He finds that nothing special has

happened to you in His eyes. In the space your lives were sometimes good and sometimes bad, but never heavier than you could bear nor lighter than they should have been. They were wonderfully measured and weighed upon the scale of His eternal wisdom.

"And now comes the new page. It is blank, but one day it will be filled with His ciphers, and after this one will come another and still another, many, many pages, and each will bear the signs of good and of evil, all written in the same gracious handwriting of the Eternal God. Each page will begin where the last one ended; and the story will not go backward, but forward, not downward, but upward. It will move slowly, imperceptibly, but time is the mercy of eternity. Sometimes it will seem to stand still, or there will be a trembling, as though the building was breaking down. But at such times, always there will come a breath of His breath into the world, spirit of His spirit and light of His light. Always, at such times, one will arise with His sign upon his brow and His smile upon his lips; he will mix the mortar and take up the hod, and lay the next brick."

He put his hand on Lydia's arm, and his eyes widened and flamed.

"And so something new will grow out of this land, Sister Lydia," he said. "Something that will have nothing to do with you or me, and yet something that would be unthinkable without us. Here you are taking root; and the soil on which you stand is good and fruitful, fertilized by the bodies of the locusts.

"I do not know what it will be like, and I cannot describe it to you because it is greater than words. I only know that it does not rest upon the palaces of the rich, nor upon the hovels of the poor; not upon streets and squares, nor even upon the bells in your churches. Its foundation stone is laid in hearts like your hearts, and in minds like your minds, on earth like this earth. It is already founded in this valley and in the next, and in all the valleys beyond, and upon all the hills of the land where tillers of the soil struggle and suffer and overcome and are greater than hail and locusts and drought and floods. It is founded wherever each man is no more than his neighbour, each free and yet each man bound to his neighbour in common responsibility to God. It exists where men cling to the soil and are not driven away like the shifting sand dunes."

He stood up, removed his hat and stretched out his arms. Solemnly the old words of the Mormons fell from his lips:

"Come then, ye Saints of the Latter Day, and all ye great and small, wise and foolish, rich and poor, noble and ignoble, exalted and persecuted, rulers and ruled of the earth, who love virtue and hate vice and help us to do His work, which the Lord has required at our hands. And inasmuch as the glory of the latter house shall be a hundredfold and your rest shall be glorious.

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